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**ALTERING THE NEBRASKA LANDSCAPE:
TECUMSEH AND JOHNSON COUNTY, 1854-1900**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Rebecca L. Howard

May 1999

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts,
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Committee

James B. Henderson - Geography
Harold A. Palstrom - History

Chairperson William C. Butt

Date April 20, 1999

ABSTRACT

The history of a people, be they Native Americans or pioneer settlers, can be uncovered in their landscape. The Euro-American settlers who moved onto the prairies of Nebraska and the Great Plains faced an environment unlike the wooded regions of the East. Native American traditions and land use patterns were replaced by those of the settlers. Nebraska's Native landscape was altered under the hand of this new dominant culture. Physical alterations included the breaking of the prairie sod for farming and the construction of towns and railroads.

Johnson County, Nebraska, which sits among the southeastern counties of the state, was established soon after the organization of the Nebraska Territory. Tecumseh, Johnson County's seat of government, was founded before railroads were built into the area. Its downtown commercial district has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and the Victorian style brick buildings which surround the courthouse square create the timeless image of a turn-of-the century community.

Tecumseh had three phases of construction by 1900. Log shanties dominated the area's first building period. These humble structures were superseded by false-front and planed wood buildings, which were in turn replaced by brick and stone construction. Each of these time periods witnessed the building of a courthouse in the community. The first structure was a rough, unplastered building used for storage of county documents. A second courthouse was built in 1868 and a third in 1888-89. Still presiding over Tecumseh's public square, this third building provides an example of the boosterism and pride Johnson County citizens expressed during the late 1880s.

Understanding the alteration of the area, however, requires more than a study of architectural changes. Newspapers, pioneer memoirs and letters help give this history life and provide information on the land. Trees, fences, electric poles, evolving agriculture and modern highways obscure our view of what this land once looked like. Seeing beyond these barriers may help us to understand how we have changed the land and perhaps how those transformations still affect the lives of Johnson County citizens.

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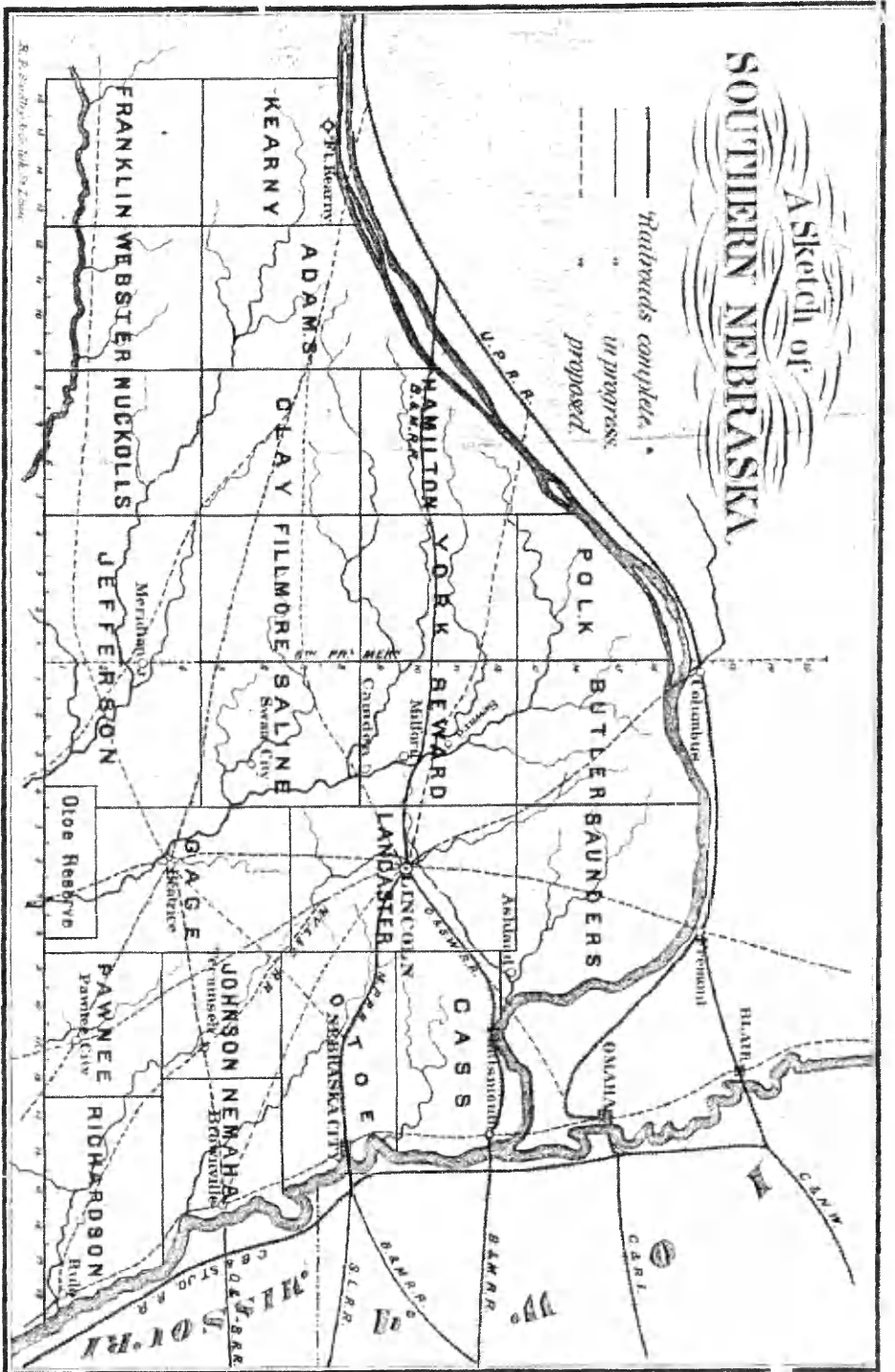
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Johnson County, Nebraska, is a land of gently rolling hills. Tucked away in the southeastern corner of Nebraska, it is crossed diagonally, northwest to southeast, by the Big Nemaha River [Map 1.1]. Unlike the Missouri River, the waters of the Nemaha are not so grand as to allow passage by boat. The river, however, did provide a constant source of water and early milling sites. In 1856, the town of Tecumseh was founded near the banks of the river, approximately thirty miles west of the Missouri and in 1857 became the county seat. No railroad had yet been built to serve the county and all the goods and materials required to build a new community had to be brought overland from Nebraska City or Brownville, towns which had been established on the Missouri River. Today Johnson County can be approached on U.S. Highway 50 or 36, and as travelers drive toward Tecumseh, they are surrounded by farmland [Map 1.2]. Ghosts of the county's past can be seen through the car window. A small derelict building, weathered by time, stands at a crossroads beckoning the traveler into the past. As one arrives in Tecumseh, the specters of history are present as well. Downtown, Tecumseh's courthouse square takes one back in time. The Johnson County Courthouse dominates the landscape of the square. A Romanesque Revival structure, the building stands solidly in its place as it has for over a hundred years, while the other buildings on the square echo its substantial lines. Stopping on the courthouse lawn, the visitor might feel that she has stepped back in time, and the student of history might ponder the currents of the past and the lives of people who built this town, its public buildings, and courthouse square.



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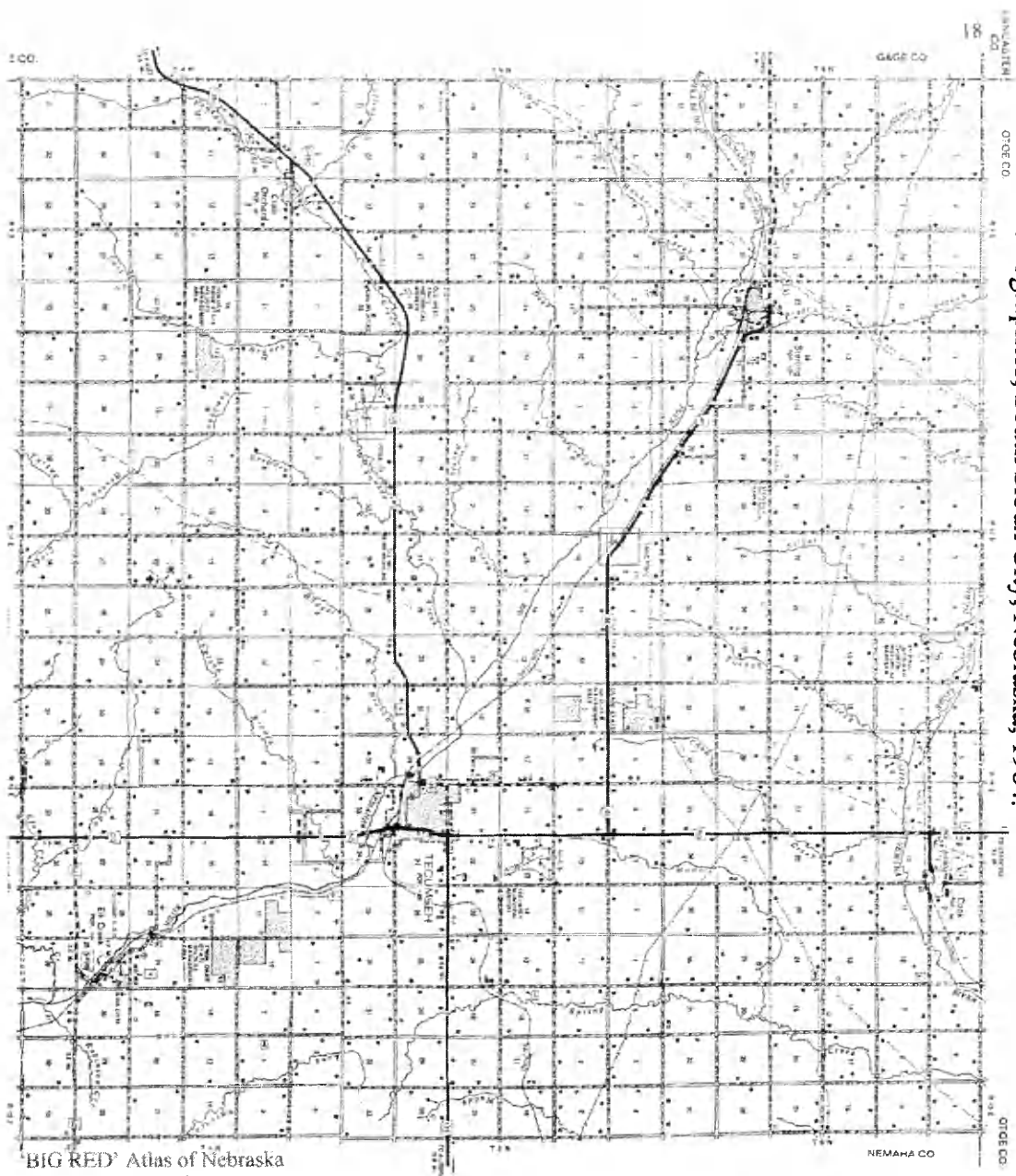
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Nebraska State Historical Society

[Map 1.1]

[Map 1.2] Johnson County. "BIG RED" Atlas of Nebraska, Western Cartographers, South Sioux City, Nebraska, 1984.



"BIG RED" Atlas of Nebraska
 Western Cartographers
 South Sioux City NE 1984

JOHNSON COUNTY
 PATENT

JOHNSON COUNTY

They might include people like Noble Strong who on the morning of 8 April 1856, left his home in Old Warren, Connecticut, to begin a journey to the west. He made his way leisurely by train, stopping over with relatives in places like Batavia, New York, and Chicago, Illinois. Almost a full month after his departure, Noble reached his brother William's farm in Oxford, Iowa. Dissatisfied with the area as was William, Noble moved on. By 11 August 1856, he arrived in the newly established Nebraska Territory and his enthusiasm for the new country and the life it seemed to promise was clear:

I have never enjoyed myself better than the present season, for I have been learning something new nearly every day. I am at present where I wrote you last, on a branch of the Big Nemaha River. This is about the size of the Sucker Brook. There are a large number of creeks in this country with timber on them, most of the way from head to the mouth. The timber is situated in groves of from one to fifty acres, sometimes as large as 80 to 100 acres – but it is not often that you can get a claim with more than from 10 to 40 acres.

In regard to the taking of claims, every man twenty-one years of age is entitled to hold one claim of 160 acres, in one body. Also any woman that is the head of the family.

In order to have a claim hold, a person when he makes it, must lay the logs for the foundation of this house. This will hold good for thirty days. There must be work done on it for every thirty days, that is something on the claim for an improvement, and there must be a house built within three months, from the time the foundation is laid.

If this is not done, the first man that comes along can go on and take the same claim. There are a good many in the Territory, especially around the towns, who make a business of taking claims and selling. Claims sell for from \$25. To \$600. with no improvements, but a small log house of [or] shanty on them.

I have taken two claims. One for myself and one for William, if he is of a mind to come out. If he knew as much about the country as I do, he would neither eat, drink nor sleep until he had made up his mind to come to Nebraska.

I could not buy a farm in Iowa as good as I have selected here, for \$10.00 per acre and money down. Here we shall not have to pay for the land under a year, and perhaps three.

The land where I am, is not surveyed yet, only into townships. These will be run out into sections as soon as Congress makes an appropriation for that purpose.

We are near the township line on the south and west, so that we have measured out our claims with a rope. In that way we have found within a few feet of where the corners of our farms will come. On one of the claims that I have taken, there is full 20 acres of timber, a creek of never failing water running through the entire farm. The banks of the creek are high and on one side of the creek there is a good limestone quarry some twenty rods in length. The stone now in sight being from four to six feet thick, lying in layers from one to four inches in thickness. There is no waste land. It can be ploughed up to the bank of the creek.

On the other claim, there is water, it being on the same creek (but one half mile between the two claims) and a much larger quantity of timber, but no stone as I have yet found. If William comes there will be four Yankee families here this winter, and that will be worth something.¹

Yet more than fifty years passed from the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and Noble Strong's arrival in 1856. Beginning with Thomas Jefferson's historic purchase and ending with the settlement of the Great Plains, the events of the nineteenth century defined the physical boundaries of the continental United States and witnessed the population of vast new regions. In 1803, President Jefferson and the U. S. Congress acquired New Orleans and the North American interior from Napoleon for the sum of \$15,000,000. The Louisiana Purchase was a land deal of immense proportions, more than doubling the existing land base of the United States. Over a period of time, the 828,000 square miles of land purchased were carved into new states for the Union,

including Nebraska. The organization and settlement of Nebraska, however, would not begin until mid-century; exploration and the delineation of this expansive landscape came first.²

With the sponsorship of Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark began their historic adventure. On 22 May 1804, these two explorers and their crew began to make their way up the Missouri River.³ Lewis and Clark passed along the edge of what would become Nebraska Territory as they followed the Missouri River north. Descriptions provided by Lewis, while accurate, were also idealized. He drew a picture of lush grasses and fertile soil.⁴ Ultimately, Lewis and Clark traversed thousands of miles through lands never seen by Europeans, established contacts with Native peoples and emerged at the Columbia River to stand on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Accomplishing these feats, they secured their place in the story of U.S. conquest and strengthened U.S. claims to the Oregon region. The explorations of Zebulon M. Pike in 1806 along the Republican River also contributed to the nation's understanding of the vast landscape of the Great Plains. Pike, however, did not romanticize the landscape of the plains but compared it instead to the deserts of Africa.⁵ Despite the effort and expense of these explorations, no popular interest in the West was immediately generated and settlement of the Great Plains was considered impossible.

Manifest Destiny as an ideological movement emerged in the 1840s and may have been a major influence on nineteenth century expansion. The nation's sense of self or nationalism, from which Manifest Destiny and expansionism drew their energy, developed in the era following the War of 1812: "We may not have fought the war as

one nation,” writes Thomas Bailey, “but we emerged one nation.”⁶ This author provides several examples of this growing nationalism, which manifested itself in political, cultural, and military fashion. The works of James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving began to gain recognition in this era and they were the first American authors to use scenes and themes familiar in American society. At this time, the nation’s standing army was enlarged, as was its navy. Bailey also cites architectural evidence of the Union’s growing nationalism, stating that “[a] more handsome national capital began to rise from the ashes of Washington—a capital fit to symbolize our prospective greatness.”⁷

Like Bailey, John Bodnar and Donald R. Hickey see a growing nationalism in the decades following the War of 1812. Bodnar writes that: “The state, as a symbol and as a political structure, exerted considerable influence over politics and culture in the century.”⁸ He also asserts that by 1817 commemorative celebrations such as the Fourth of July, which canonized aging veterans of the Revolutionary War and the Declaration of Independence, were widespread.⁹ Donald R. Hickey, on the other hand, observed that in addition to encouraging nationalism the war crushed the remaining power of the “Indians of the Old West.” The conflict, in Hickey’s opinion, gave the United States “both the excuse and the incentive to accelerate the forced removal of the eastern tribes.”¹⁰ From the sense of power instilled by victory and the nationalism that manifested itself in the years following the war grew the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the movement of western expansion.¹¹ Politicians and patriots began to espouse the concept of a pre-ordained geography to which the United States was heir. The grand experiment, which

had begun in 1776, must take, by force if necessary, the land to which it was entitled. According to Ray Allen Billington: “[t]he righteous but ill-informed people of that day sincerely believed their democratic institutions were of such magnificent perfection that no boundaries could contain them. This was not imperialism, but enforced salvation.”¹² Merle Curti also wrote of this geographic nationalism and asserts that: “[g]eography figured more frequently than race in the ideology of American Nationalism during this period.”¹³

James K. Polk was an expansionist Democrat and when elected to the United States presidency in 1844 he stood on the platform of Manifest Destiny. The “re-annexation” of Texas and the “re-occupation” of Oregon were what he promised during the election and what he delivered during his time in office. A compromise between the U. S. and Great Britain settled the Oregon question in 1846, but no such compromise was reached with Mexico. When attempts to purchase California from the Mexican government failed, Polk pushed for war. From May 1846 until February 1848, the armies of Mexico and the United States fought until the American forces prevailed. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the fighting, and Mexico ceded California, Texas, and most of the other lands north of the Rio Grande to the United States. Under the terms of the treaty, the U. S. paid \$15,000,000 for what amounted to almost half of Mexico.¹⁴

Soon after the Mexican War, the U. S. government turned its attention to the Central Great Plains. Although a possession of the United States since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, this land had remained an unorganized territory. The Platte River, which traces its course across the Plains landscape, acted as a guide for those who

followed the calls of land and gold to Oregon and California. Despite the legions of travelers who crossed the prairies, few Euro-Americans stayed in the Nebraska region. The land, belonging to the U.S. government, had not yet been opened for settlement. Pressure began to grow, however, for the territory to be organized and while boosters pushed for a transcontinental railroad and argued over southern and northern routes, would-be settlers positioned themselves along the Nebraska border.¹⁵

Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois sponsored the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. The Act proposed a division of the vast Nebraska region and the development of two separately organized territories. Douglas owned both real estate and railroad stock in the north and believed organization of the Nebraska Territory to be the key to securing a northern route for the transcontinental railroad. Politically the Kansas-Nebraska Act may also have seemed a winning strategy, for it proposed a possible solution to the question of slavery in the West. With its passage, the Missouri Compromise would be repealed and popular sovereignty would be extended to the new territories. Under a system of popular sovereignty, each new territory would be allowed to determine its own future as a free or slave state.¹⁶

Douglas and other supporters of the Kansas-Nebraska Act probably did not foresee the resistance of northern abolitionists to the possible addition of slave territories or the tragedy that would take place in bleeding Kansas. Native Americans also suffered in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Their language and religion came under further attack as they were moved onto reservations. In the wake of this legislation, Euro-American settlement west of the Missouri River began, and a new Nebraska history

opened on the stage of the Great Plains.¹⁷ Whether it is a history of destiny manifested or another chapter in the conquest record of the United States depends upon who tells the story. Patricia Nelson Limerick points out that “to most twentieth-century Americans, the legacy of slavery was serious business, while the legacy of conquest was not.” The result, according to her, has been that “the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness.”¹⁸ Yet, neither the struggles of the Otoe and Missouri Indians, nor the history of Nebraska’s Euro-American settlers is simply a story of conquest or adventure.

Euro-American interest in Nebraska and the Great Plains grew slowly. Even after the explorations of Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Pike, the central plains remained Native American territory. Archaeological evidence indicates that native peoples began to live and hunt within the region approximately 11,500 years ago.¹⁹ Despite such evidence, alterations wrought upon the landscape by native peoples are often overlooked and the land represented as untouched wilderness. The Nebraska region remained their domain, if only by virtue of physical possession, until the mid-1800s. In 1854, the land was redefined for Euro-Americans with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Formally organized as a territory of the United States and open for Euro-American settlement, the territory entered a time of transition. Native American settlements disappeared. The land that had in part been shaped by Native American cultures was now altered into the cultural imagery of Euro-American immigrants. Statehood followed in 1867, again changing the political definition of the land.

In many ways, this early settlement era defined the geographical and cultural constructs we continue to find in much of rural Nebraska. The sod broken by the farmer's plow banished the native grasses of the plains in favor of corn and wheat. Counties and towns were surveyed and quarter sections and voting districts were established, as a thousand invisible lines were laid down upon the land to create a western concept of order.²⁰ In the words of Limerick:

Conquest basically involved the drawing of lines on a map, the definition and allocation of ownership (personal, tribal, corporate, state, federal, and international), and the evolution of land from matter to property. The process had two stages: the initial drawing of the lines (which we have usually called the frontier stage) and the subsequent giving of meaning and power to those lines, which is still under way.²¹

Moreover, churches, schools, businesses and homes were constructed, transferring Western culture and a sense of “civilization” to the landscape of the Nebraska plains.

The challenge of history, to tell the stories of the past, has been described as both art and science. Historians such as Barbara W. Tuchman attempt to transmit their experience and knowledge of the craft to other practitioners and students. Tuchman's *Practicing History* is a collection of essays which endeavor to do just that. Tuchman writes that: “[r]eaders want to see man shaping his destiny or, at least, struggling with it,” and that, “the task . . . devolves upon historians to tell what human history *is* about and what are the forces that *do* drive us.”²²

Historians have attempted to fulfill these tasks in a variety of ways. In the case of American Western History, those attempts have long been framed within the context of Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis. At a meeting of the American Historical Association

on 12 July 1893, Turner delivered a paper titled “The Significance of the Frontier In American History.” Within that paper he promoted two ideas, which have been argued, supported and challenged ever since. The first emphasized what Turner saw as the transforming quality of the frontier. He asserted that it was the experience of movement and the freedom provided by an open frontier, which transformed Europeans into Americans. In the same work, however, in which the frontier was given respectability as a builder of character, Turner also underlined the words of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890. The Superintendent’s remarks and Turner’s thesis declared that the frontier of the American West had come to a close. This assertion was based on population statistics, which showed an average of two or more people per square mile, breaking forever the frontier line.²³ Today historians like Patricia Nelson Limerick treat the West as a place, a landscape with which cultures interacted, rather than solely as a frontier processing the character of America.

Landscape and its effect on culture and history are subjects dealt with by cultural geographers, anthropologists, and architects as well as historians. Truly a multidisciplinary concept, landscape has been noted as a factor in nationalism, as discussed above, and has been credited with the creation of the American psyche, as outlined in the Turner thesis. Cultural geographers also refer to a “cultural landscape,” which Gordon M. Riedesel defines as “the forms created on the land by man from which interpretations of culture can be made.”²⁴ Anthropologists study landscape in terms of cultural perceptions and adaptations to environment. R. Keesing in his study, “Kwaoi Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Society,” points out that there are

differences in how observers and natives may see the same landscape. This variation in perception is also part of the cultural landscape. “The landscape of the Kwaoi interior,” Keesing writes, “appears, to the alien eye, as a sea of green, a dense forest broken periodically by gardens and recent secondary growth, and an occasional tiny settlement. . . . To the Kwaoi eye, this landscape is not only divided by invisible lines into named land tracts and settlement sites; it is seen as structured by history.”²⁵

Architects and historians such as Vincent Scully and Carroll Van use the theoretical framework of the cultural landscape as well. Scully suggests that the relationship between people and the landscape provides the basis of architecture. He argues that “[o]ut of that relationship, human beings fashion an environment for themselves, a space to live in, suggested by their patterns of life and constructed around whatever symbols of reality seem important to them.”²⁶ Van West in an article titled “The Best Kind of Building: The New Deal Landscape of the Northern Plains, 1933-42,” addresses public buildings as evidence of the cultural landscape.²⁷ In these works, Scully and Van West illustrate some of the physical and perceptual characteristics of landscape that can provide significant cultural and historical evidence.

Nebraska’s landscape, like that of the Kwaoi, has been divided by “invisible lines into named land tracts and settlement sites.” We may better know these divisions and settlement sites as counties and towns. A nation and its states or provinces are themselves but invisible divisions of a larger landmass and psychological constructs of society. The lines that delineate Nebraska’s counties are like those of any state. They are divisions on a map that exist because we as a society accept them as real.²⁸ In this

context, how, when, and why such lines were drawn upon the landscape and how, when, and why settlements grew within those lines, become essential questions in the study of Nebraska's history.

The processes of settlement and landscape alteration reoccurred with the addition of every new Nebraska county. The promotions and politics of the railroads, however, particularly affected those counties established during and after the 1870s. Broadly speaking, the early settlers of Nebraska's eastern counties brought the railroad to the land, while in the western counties the railroads provided the settlers.²⁹ For each new county, the establishment of a seat of government appears to have been a moment of primary importance. Elections were waged, judicial battles joined, and illegal maneuvers were tried or suspected in many counties; such was the significance of the county seat. In many ways, the establishment and growth of the county seat reflected the attitudes and growth of the county at large. Today, throughout rural Nebraska, evidence of the state's early patterns of growth persists. A traveler will commonly find communities that have seemingly experienced little physical change since the turn of the century. Such extant physical evidence can be utilized to understand the changes wrought upon the land by Euro-American settlement. The modification of Nebraska's landscape occurred on both physical and perceptual levels. To study these changes, I have investigated the establishment and growth of a single Nebraska county, focusing particularly on its seat of government. After a review of several eastern Nebraska counties, all established and organized before the introduction of rail service, I selected Johnson County's governing

town, Tecumseh, as a window through which to view the alteration of the Nebraska landscape.

Johnson County, Nebraska, established by the Territorial Legislature in 1855, was formally organized in the fall of 1856. Nestled in the southeastern corner of the state, Johnson County is bordered to the east by Nemaha County and to the south by Pawnee County. Johnson's eastern border lies approximately twenty-two miles west of the Missouri River. With no direct access to the Missouri and no rail service until 1872, Johnson County was established based on overland trade with Nebraska City and Brownville.³⁰ Small in both landmass and population, Johnson County provided an area of appropriate size, and the historical landscape and records available at Tecumseh provided the necessary documentation for my study.

Established in 1856, the community of Tecumseh became the county seat in the fall of 1857. With only minor opposition, Tecumseh has retained this distinction. Such permanence of the county seat combined with the absence of courthouse fires has left the county's documents intact. The minutes of the county commissioners' meetings are available, beginning with the first meeting of that body on 13 April 1857. Tecumseh and Johnson County seem to have experienced three distinct periods of growth. Each phase of the area's development would entail the use of differing styles of architecture, construction materials, and settlement patterns, with the community's final phase of growth occurring at the end of the nineteenth century. Tecumseh's business district and public buildings retain much of their turn-of-the-century structure. These extant sites are a part of the county's cultural landscape. Primary evidence of the cultural landscape

created in the last half of the nineteenth century, these historic buildings continue to act as the public face of Tecumseh. Investigation of these historic buildings can expand our understanding of the cultural influences at work in their construction, provide information on community growth, and aid in their own preservation.

“To found a city is a human ambition older than history. The name of the engineer that set the first block and street in Jerusalem . . . may be obliterated by the tides of time, but his work endures to this day. . . .”³¹ In 1886, C. H. Gere, a resident of Lincoln and treasurer of the Nebraska State Historical Society, wrote these words in an essay extolling the history of the city of Lincoln. They echo an apparent enthusiasm for building and immortality shared by many of this era. Such eagerness seemed to grow in intensity as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Downtown Tecumseh was virtually reconstructed during this period. Almost all of the downtown buildings date to this period. More modern brick buildings replaced false front wooden structures that appear in photographs of the town in the 1860s and 1870s. The clapboard two-story structure that had served as the county courthouse since 1868 was condemned as a firetrap and an embarrassment to the community. A new county courthouse would take its place in 1888-89 and the community’s built landscape soon included a grand city hall building constructed during those same years.

The Nebraska State Historical Society completed a preliminary historic building survey of Johnson County during the early 1970s and brief descriptions of the county’s early history exist in several studies. A handful of Masters’ theses have been written which discuss Johnson County’s agriculture and one thesis written in the 1950s

investigated the transfer of public lands to private holdings during the county's early settlement era. A local history was pieced together from reprinted newspaper articles in 1956 and a former curator of the Johnson County Historical Society has written several papers on aspects of the county's history. In 1969, in celebration of the state's centennial and the Johnson County Fair, a pictorial history was compiled. This work provides a collection of photographs that illustrate the changes made to the commercial and public face of Tecumseh between 1870 and 1900. It also illustrates, when compared to contemporary photographs, that Tecumseh's appearance has changed little since that time. This previous work now makes it possible to write a more comprehensive historical treatment of Johnson County's settlement era and cultural landscape.³²

I have endeavored, therefore, to conduct such a study. I have focused on the growth of Tecumseh's built landscape and developed broad chronological subdivisions or horizon lines that may help bring into focus the story of Tecumseh's growth and its importance as the county seat. Thomas J. Schlereth, like Carroll Van West, has used the built environment as historical evidence. In his book, *Artifacts and the American Past*, Schlereth writes: "[m]aterial culture study attempts to explain why things were made, why they took the forms they did, and what social, functional, aesthetic, or symbolic needs they serve." He goes on to say that: "[t]he historian's primary purpose in using artifacts is always to interpret them in their cultural history context."³³ Such has been my intent. The built landscape is, however, only one piece of the evidence I have considered in my investigation of Johnson County's settlement history. Local historical materials such as newspapers and county records have provided important evidence, as have

county maps and photographs. Methods of traditional historical inquiry as well as architectural history and cultural geography have been utilized. It has been the aim of my research to illustrate the alterations wrought upon the land of Johnson County by Euro-American settlement and to understand the cultural mechanisms such as economics, politics, and religion, which may have prompted growth.

¹ Noble Strong, 11 August 1856, Strong Family Correspondence, typescript, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as NSHS). Family letters transcribed by Agnes M. Strong in 1923, photocopy donated to NSHS under the title “Squatter Sovereignty [sic]” but cataloged by the Society under Strong Family Correspondence.

² Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 446-50.

³ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1.

⁶ Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic* 2d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 222.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-23.

⁸ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Short History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹² Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 568.

¹³ Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 393.

¹⁴ Richard Griswald del Castillo, “Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” in *The United States and Mexico at War: Nineteenth Century Expansionism and Conflict*, ed. Donald S. Frazier (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1998), 437-38.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid., 390.
- ¹⁶ Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 71-72.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 77.
- ¹⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 18-19.
- ¹⁹ Jack L. Hofman and Russell W. Graham, "Paleo-Indian Cultures of the Great Plains," in *Archaeology on the Great Plains*, ed. W. Raymond Wood (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 89.
- ²⁰ David Gebhard and Gerald Mansheim, *Buildings of Iowa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.
- ²¹ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 27
- ²² Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 54.
- ²³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961), 37-62; Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West: Perpetual Mirage," *Harper's* 214 (May 1957): 25-31; Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, 17-32.
- ²⁴ Gordon M. Riedesel, "The Geography of Saunders County: Rural Cemeteries from 1859," *Nebraska History* 61 (Summer 1980): 215.
- ²⁵ R. Keesing, "Kwaoi Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Society," in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, ed. Eric Hirsh and Michael O'Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 94.
- ²⁶ Vincent Scully, *Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 1.
- ²⁷ Carroll Van West, "'The Best Kind of Building': The New Deal Landscape of the Northern Plains, 1933-42," *Great Plains Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1994): 129-41.
- ²⁸ Suggested from: Keesing, "Kwaoi Religion;" Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*; Gebhard and Mansheim, *Buildings of Iowa*.
- ²⁹ Frederick C. Luebke, "Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History," *Nebraska History* 69 (Winter 1988): 154.

³⁰ Evan E. Evans, "An Analytical Study of Land Transfer to Private Ownership in Johnson County, Nebraska" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1950), 4.

³¹ C. H. Gere, "The Capital Question in Nebraska and the Location of the Seat of Government at Lincoln," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 2 (1887), 63.

³² John Q. Magie and Carl H. Jones, *A History and Historic Sites Survey of Johnson, Nemaha, Pawnee, and Richardson Counties in Southeastern Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969); A.T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* 2 (Chicago: Western Historical Company 1882); J. Sterling Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* 2 (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1907); Evans, "An Analytical Study of Land Transfer;" Johnson County Centennial History Committee, *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, (Tecumseh: Tecumseh Chieftain Printing, 1956); Thurman Wadley, "The History of the First Johnson County Jail: 1872-1974," typescript, 1975, Johnson County Historical Society, Tecumseh, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as JCHS); Thurman Wadley, "The Corson Creek Earth Mound," typescript, JCHS; Tecumseh Centennial Inc., *Johnson County Fair and State Centennial: August 17-18-19-20-21, 1967* (Omaha: Hochen Bindery Ltd.); National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form: Tecumseh Architectural District, 1975, photocopy, NSHS.

³³ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980), 3.

CHAPTER 2

The End of the Native American Landscape

The history of Johnson County and the building of its county seat are Euro-American stories. They are tales, which contain elements of daring, as defined by American culture -- man against nature, the industry of the yeoman farmer, and the challenge of a new land. Yet it is a history, which begins on a less valiant note, the dispossession of Native lands. The Nebraska Territory, established by the U. S. Congress in 1854, was not an empty or unused land before settlement. It had already been modified from its natural state by Native American occupation. Thus, to clearly examine the transformation of Johnson County's built landscape, it will first be necessary to review Native American tenancy and land use within the area during the years preceding Euro-American settlement. Who were the native people occupying southeastern Nebraska at that time? What was the condition of the land to which settlers came, and what effects, if any, did Native American landscape alterations have on Euro-American settlement patterns? In time, the removal of native tribes from Nebraska Territory became an important step in opening the land to white farmers, ranchers, and town builders. This removal of Nebraska's Indian tribes created tangible modifications to the landscape. Reservation boundaries were drawn and traditional native hunting and agricultural patterns were disrupted. Yet an evolution in the country's vision of the region preceded such physical changes. To fully understand the transformation of the Great Plains and Johnson County, therefore, it will also be important to consider how perceptions of the landscape were altered in the years prior to settlement.

As the colonization of North America progressed, modest attempts were made to respect Native American sovereignty, but such efforts were limited and unsuccessful. The unrelenting growth of Euro-American populations imposed continual pressures on Native lands and autonomy. One solution, endorsed by Thomas Jefferson in the early nineteenth century, included the creation of a vast reserve of western lands as a dominion of Native sovereignty. The removal of tribes from the East to the boundless, untamable regions of the West seemingly posed an obvious solution to this conflict of cultures. The idea, however, did not become policy until 1834, when by act of Congress “Indian Country” was established within an expansive region of land north of Texas and west of the Missouri River.¹

The Otoe and Missouriia people were among those tribes already residing in “Indian Country” at the time of its official designation. They were two of the many tribes pushed west by colonial settlement of the Atlantic coast and the migrations of other tribes. The Otoe, Missouriia, Iowa and Winnebago tribes were linked historically by language and territory. They apparently functioned as a single unit and occupied lands in the region of the Great Lakes until 1700 or so. Subjugated by French traders and Algonquian alliances, the tribes began to migrate. The Otoe, Missouriia and Iowa split off from the Winnebago in the region of Green Bay and continued their southwesterly migration.² In the years that followed, the Iowa also separated from the group, remaining in the vicinity of the Des Moines River, while the Otoe and Missouriia proceeded with their exodus from the north. This group finally arrived at the mouth of the Missouri River after 1721. Following their arrival in the Missouri River Valley the Otoe and

Missouria also divided, the result of a quarrel between two of the tribe's most powerful chiefs. Tribal history indicates that the argument arose over the seduction of one chief's daughter by the son of another. The division appears to have been made before 1673, as Lewis and Clark reported accounts given by Otoe and Missouria envoys of the decimation of 300 Missouria tribesmen by Sauk raiders during the 1730s. After the division of the tribe, the Otoe moved north along the Missouri River, settling near the confluence of the Platte River. Two separate accounts recorded in 1758 and 1761 place the tribe on the western side of the Missouri River south of the Platte.³ There in the southeastern section of what would become the Nebraska Territory, the Otoe people developed their tribal lands.⁴

Driven by conflict into a history of migration and separation, the Otoe and Missouria peoples were also led to re-consolidation by such turmoil. Hostilities with the Sioux and other neighboring tribes reduced Missouria hunting grounds, while unfamiliar ailments reduced their population. Hard hit by this warfare and disease, the Missouria people dwindled significantly in number, while their Otoe cousins, on the western side of the Missouri River, seemed to escape the decimation. Sometime prior to 1800, the Missouria people again allied themselves with the Otoe. In 1804, Lewis and Clark found the two tribes living and hunting co-operatively south of the Platte River. Together they would sign the treaty of 1830 as a single unit, relinquishing all interests in lands east of the Missouri River.⁵

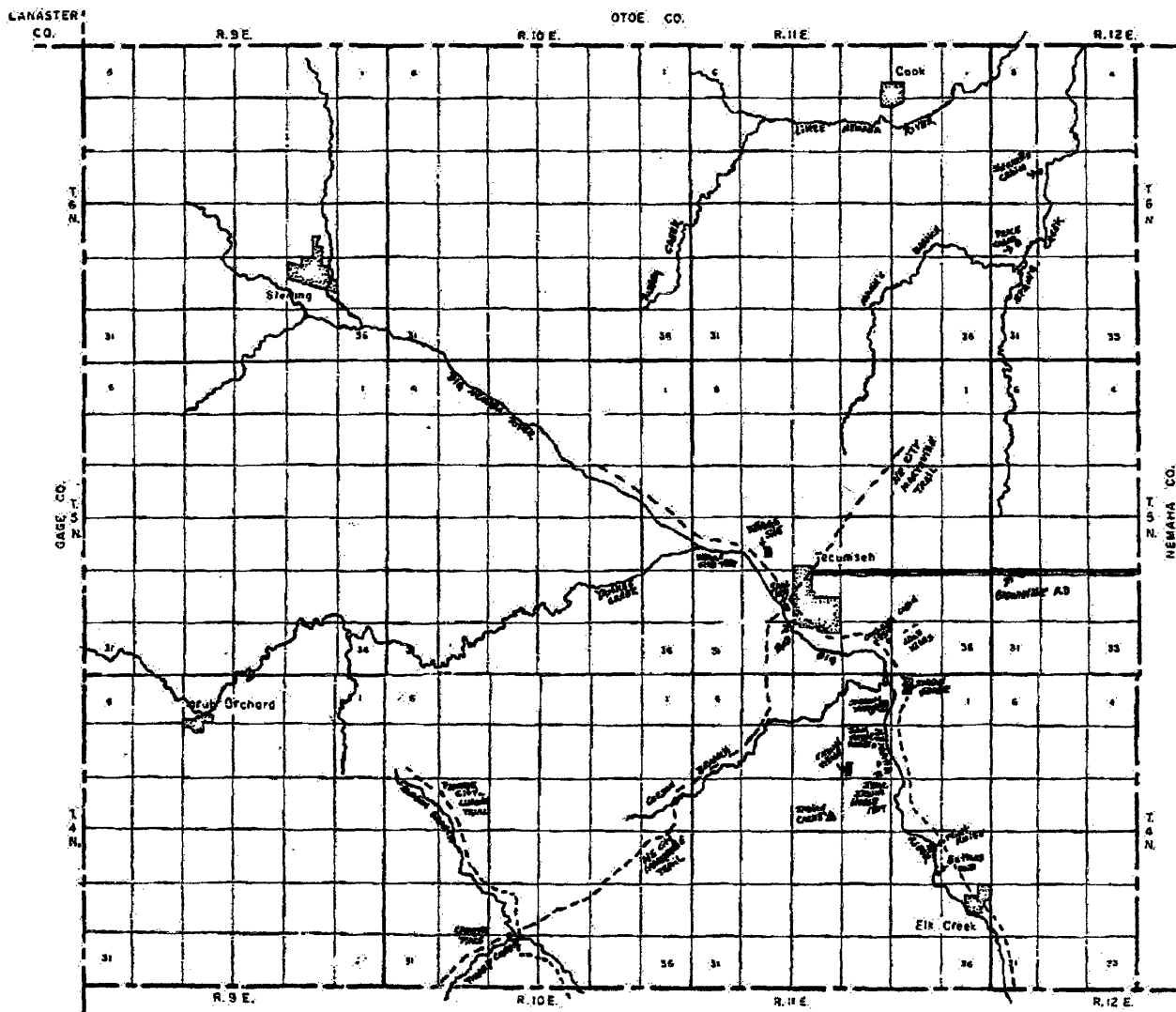
West of the Missouri River, in the lands below the Platte, the Big Nemaha and Little Nemaha Rivers make their way through rolling meadowlands. Trees crowd the

riverbanks and follow a dozen smaller streams, creeks, and tributaries across the scene. Before the advent of settlement agriculture, the landscape was dominated by deeply rooted prairie grass. The elements of fire and water, shaping the environment of the Great Plains, held back the woodlands and fostered the growth of these expansive grasslands. It was an environment supportive of the great bison herds and Native American Plains culture complexes.⁶ Melvin R. Gilmore concludes: “The chase of the buffalo with all that it entailed in habits of domestic life, instrumentality and forms of government, industrial activities, and religious rites, was directly related to the prairie and Plains formation of vegetation.”⁷ Physical aspects of the region affected forms of Native American land use and architecture, as it would later influence Plains settlement.⁸

A semi-sedentary people, the Otoe and Missouri tribes built villages, lived in earth lodges, cultivated crops, and made seasonal hunts.⁹ Villages, built and occupied in succession along the banks of the Platte and Big Nemaha rivers, provided a base for the tribal economy. Crops cultivated in fields surrounding a village could be harvested while the resources of neighboring river and prairie environs might be readily exploited. Burial grounds fixed in adjacent locales helped secure the position of the village as the social and ceremonial center of tribal life. The seasonal exploitation of resources, however, regularly drew the Otoe-Missouria people from village life into transitory camps. Summer and fall-winter bison hunts left villages unoccupied for more than half the year.¹⁰ John Bradbury recorded one of the earliest descriptions of an Otoe-Missouria village in 1811. Located at the confluence of the Elkhorn and Platte rivers, the village stood empty at the time of his arrival. Bison hunting had drawn the villagers away and

Bradbury took the opportunity to study his surroundings. He recorded riverbanks stripped of timber and fifty-four earth lodges. Each lodge stood roughly forty feet in diameter with corridors projecting out from the center approximately twelve feet. The doorways blocked with sticks arranged in precise order were set to reveal any intrusion. One doorway, however, had been left unblocked and so Bradbury was able to enter the structure. Stepping down to the dugout floor, he found himself under a roof made of small sticks and mud. Four large posts set near the center of the structure supported the ceiling, and connected it by rafters to fifteen posts around the building's diameter.¹¹

Villages like this one were often moved short distances as timber shortages and sanitation difficulties arose.¹² The Native American landscape of southeastern Nebraska was comprised of many such sites. Further evidence of a Native American presence in the area that would become Johnson County may exist in the form of a map drawn by an anonymous source. The map, yellowed and stained, hangs in the Johnson County Museum. It illustrates the location of several Native American sites within the county, including six villages, a flint quarry, a cache of projectile points, and one burial site. Each village illustrated on the map lay along the banks of the Big Nemaha River, along side of which a pathway, identified as the St. Joseph Trail, crosses the area [Map 2.1]. The unknown cartographer's identification of this trail appears to be incorrect. The St. Joseph Trail, a route to the Oregon Trail, is shown on most maps to have only crossed the Big Nemaha River or to have followed its southern fork for a brief time before following the Big Blue River north to the Platte.



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Additions hand drawn from framed map housed at the
Johnson County Museum, Tecumseh, Nebraska.
Original author unknown.

JOHNSON

[map 1]

[Map 2.1] Hand drawn additions from map housed at the Johnson County Historical Society, Tecumseh, Nebraska.

An earthen mound discovered at Corson Creek two miles south of present day Tecumseh was attributed by local inhabitants to Native American construction. The existence of such a site would support the map's identification of village sites at this location. No Native American artifacts were ever recorded in relation to the mound to confirm this supposition, however, and the area was leveled for planting sometime prior to 1981, limiting the possibility of future study.¹³ Johnson County's historical museum houses a small number of Native American artifacts, including one flint point and three pottery vessels found locally. Museum records indicate that the flint projectile point and two of the pottery pieces, although separate finds, were located within the same general area southeast of Tecumseh. Documentation of the two pottery vessels indicates that they were found approximately one and one half miles southeast of town. The largest of the pottery vessels housed by the museum and attributed to native use was collected from an area near the south fork of the Little Nemaha River, adjacent to the present day town of Cook, Nebraska.¹⁴

Evidence of Native American occupation and land use may also be found in the region's plant life and nomenclature. The introduction of non-indigenous plant species seems obvious when speaking of the agricultural practices of Plains settlers. Perhaps less apparent are introductions to the Nebraska landscape that occurred through Native American subsistence practices. Plant distributions were affected directly, through cultivation, and indirectly, through non-intentional seed dissemination. Among the plants intentionally cultivated by the Otoe-Missouria tribe were corn, beans, and pumpkins. None of these plant types naturally occurred on the Great Plains but were introductions

from Mexico. Centuries of trade and cultural exchange developed and transferred these crops to Native American communities throughout North and South America.¹⁵

Uncultivated plants introduced to the Great Plains by Native Americans include Wild Columbine, Ladies Bouquet, and Prickly Ash. The seeds and flowers of each plant, valued as they were for their fragrance or pigment, were transported from camp to camp. No record of direct cultivation of these seeds or flowers exists. It is assumed that they were discarded after consumption in refuse piles, scattered by wind, or left behind as tribes followed their seasonal patterns of movement across the land. In this way distribution of these plant species and others occurred. Plants established in each new location would have provided fresh gathering fields that today furnish evidence of Native American land use patterns.¹⁶

The Iowa Crab Apple was probably introduced to Nebraska in this manner. Native to the lands east of the Missouri River, this variety of crab apple can also be found west of the river. Distribution of the Iowa Crab Apple west of the Missouri River appears to coincide with locations previously occupied by Native Americans within the region. These include places like Apple Creek, a small stream near the boundary line separating Knox and Holt counties and named by the Ponca and Omaha people for the crab apple trees that grow along its banks. A portable nutritional resource, crab apples appear to have been transported, consumed, and discarded by Native American communities like the Otoe and Missouri.¹⁷ Settlers, upon arrival in the southeastern counties of Nebraska Territory, discovered small groves of Iowa Crab Apple trees. Such a grove of these fruit trees, lying within the boundaries of Johnson County suggested the

name Crab Orchard, for one of the towns established during the first years of white settlement in the area.¹⁸

The protected status of “Indian Country” lasted only twenty years. On 15 March 1854, the Otoe and Missouri Indians ceded “to the United States all their country west of the Missouri River, excepting a strip of land on the waters of the Big Blue River.”¹⁹ They agreed to occupy this small area of land, ten miles wide by twenty-five miles long, in exchange for monetary compensation and protection. Hard pressed by dwindling hunting ranges and inter-tribal warfare, they were the first tribes to relinquish land titles in Nebraska Territory and so began the end of Nebraska’s Native American landscape.²⁰ To the settlers and builders of Johnson County, the importance of the treaty lay in its opening of new lands for settlement. The boundaries that would establish Johnson County as a political unit did not encompass the lands of the Blue River Reservation, which lay in neighboring Gage County across the southern Nebraska border into northern Kansas. Thus the location and conditions of the reservation, miles from Tecumseh and Johnson County, appear to have had no impact on the development of the area. Only the transient passage of tribal members, hungry and destitute through the district would draw comment in the memoirs of Johnson County settlers.²¹ Luanne McDougal, remembering her experiences in the county, which began in 1857 at the age of fifteen, noted that her fluency in any Indian language was limited to the phrase, “Get out of here.”²² The Otoe and Missouri people resided on the Blue River reservation until 1881, at which time the reservation was sold by Congressional mandate. Following the sale of their reservation, these Native people were removed to Oklahoma.²³

The landscape of the Great Plains, formed by geologic forces and modified by time, was altered in many ways by the occupation of Native American communities. These changes, however, were in most instances subtle and so have been often overlooked in discussions of Nebraska history. The most enduring images of Nebraska's pre-settlement landscape may be those recorded in the writing and cartography of adventurers and government agents, rather than those provided by the everyday lives of people such as the Otoe and Missouri. Discerning the physical realities of southeastern Nebraska's Native American landscape is only the first step in understanding the transformation of "Indian Country." The perceived landscape provided its own obstacles to white settlement.

The explorations of Zebulon Pike, 1805-07, and Lewis and Clark, 1804-06, provided the United States with its first clear images of the Great Plains. Pike's travels led him through the valley of the Russian River, while Lewis and Clark simply circumnavigated the region as they traveled up the Missouri River. Although the routes taken by these two parties differed, both groups had the opportunity to view portions of what would become the Nebraska Territory.²⁴ The reports drafted by Pike presented the picture of a barren inhospitable land. These reports contributed to the popularly held concept of the Plains as a "Great American Desert," and a formidable barrier to western settlement. The works of Lewis and Clark provided an alternate view of the vast grasslands of the Plains, one of a fertile land of tall grasses. It was this image, of vast fertile grasslands, that would be used to spark settlement and fulfill Thomas Jefferson's dream of America as a haven of family farms and small towns. Despite the allure of

Lewis and Clark's vision of the Plains, it was Zebulon Pike's impression of a Great American Desert that held the nation's imagination through the first half of the nineteenth century. Only after the region was traversed by an army of adventures and settlers headed for the gold fields of California and the lush territory of the Pacific Northwest did this image of the Great Plains begin to change.²⁵

In July 1843 the American edition of the *Edinburgh Review* contained a review of a book by Thomas J. Furnham entitled, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory*. According to the reviewer, the author saw the Plains as a region divided into three environmental zones: mixed forest and prairie lands, dry prairie country, and an expansive tract of desert. In his book, Furnham established Missouri, Arkansas, and Iowa as representatives of the mixed forest and prairie region, followed by a two or three hundred-mile region of dry prairie land. This second area of land had a drier climate and fewer trees than the first, but an equal potential for settlement. To the far west lay desert lands bound only by the Rocky Mountains, which according to this author, were fertile but arid and from which only the most rudimentary way of life could be drawn.²⁶

This article reveals a more elaborate understanding of the Great Plains region, as well as a shift in perception, from Pike's unforgiving barrier of wasteland to Lewis and Clark's agrarian wonderland. The author shows particular interest in the middle region of the prairie as a "receptacle of the great semi-civilized Indian republics," and seems to predict with great sorrow the further displacement of America's native peoples.²⁷ He could not have known how soon this prophecy would be realized. In less than five years

successive waves of adventurers, miners, and farmers would begin to cross the Great Plains. Accompanying this army of human travelers were thousands of horses, oxen, and wagons, which ground their way across the prairies until the trails that marked their progress were indelibly carved into the landscape. Following the passage of these great caravans, the unfamiliar savannas began to appear more commonplace and inviting.

The St. Joseph Trail provided a route for travelers from the river port of St. Joseph, Missouri, to the Oregon Trail. Its main course ran northwest from the Missouri River, crossing the Big Nemaha River near the current Kansas-Nebraska border and following the course of the Big Blue River through the southeastern part of what became Nebraska Territory. James Bennett followed the traces of the St. Joseph Trail in the spring of 1850. His journal entry of 25 May 1850 describes his party's encampment on "Nemehaw Creek." After a long day of traveling, pounding down twenty-five miles of trail, Bennett and his party arrived at the camp after dark. With the morning light, however, he was able to take note of his surroundings:²⁸

The scene this morning was beautiful almost beyond description. Our wagons were enclosed on three sides by high prairie bluffs, clothed in a rich carpet of deep green, while on the other side a clear stream twenty or thirty yards in width, went bounding over limestone rocks till it was lost to view a hundred yards distant, among a luxuriant growth of trees, just bursting into full foliage. Standing on the bank of the creek we could see a variety of fish, some of them ten or twelve pounds in weight, sporting in its water.²⁹

With glowing reports such as this one recorded and transmitted to the citizens of the East there is little wonder that people hungry for land and opportunity would press for the opening of the territory. A year after Bennett's 1850 crossing, General Thomas Jefferson Sutherland began a spirited campaign for territorial settlement. He attempted to

generate interest among the border towns of the Missouri River and in the Ohio River valley. Yet Sutherland's enthusiasm reportedly met with little success.³⁰ He left the frontier in the fall of 1851 only to return during the spring of 1852 with a small group of followers. He had attempted to organize a settlement party willing to move into Nebraska. His efforts failed and on 7 September 1852, Sutherland died at the Nemaha Agency on the Missouri River.³¹ The prospect of Nebraska settlement, however, was revived later that year by a handful of Indian Agents and government employees working in the unorganized "Indian Country." They sent a delegate to Washington, D.C., in 1852 and another in 1853.³² This second delegation reached the nation's capital the same year the U.S. Army began surveying possible routes for a transcontinental railway and the perceptual transformation of Great Plains was almost complete. The lands of Nebraska and the West could no longer be characterized as impenetrable barriers when the prospect of a railroad to the Pacific was under consideration. Nor could they be viewed as desolate, uninhabitable, wastelands, when the letters of travelers and promoters like Sutherland described tender green grasses and flourishing trees and settlers declared their readiness to possess the land.

Only two things more had to be done, it seems, to transform the wild land representations of Nebraska and the Great Plains into images of an agricultural paradise. The Native American populations of the region had to be contained or removed and the legal status of the land had to be resolved. The Otoe-Missouria Treaty signed 15 March 1854, removed tribal claims to the fertile lands bordering the Missouri River below the Platte and passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act two months later legally redefined the

region. Kansas and Nebraska were opened for settlement and the transformation of the landscape began in earnest. These tasks had been replete with boosterism, illusion, and optimism and such were the elements that colored passages like this one from *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*:

The program of the age is progress and again a new star, perhaps several, is about to be added to our national ensign. Nebraska is no longer a myth: she claims her rights and “manifest destiny” is about to allow them. As yet the abode of traders and trappers, red men and buffalo – ere many days the restless tide of emigration will cross her border, will overrun her prairies and plains, will float up her broad rivers and sparkling streams and rest beneath the shade of forests of ancient oak, lofty cotton-wood and graceful willows. Not a spot will be sacred to the researches and prying curiosity of the genius of the universal Yankee nation. Here with almost every verity of soil, climate, and production, our expansive genius will find “ample room”. . . .³³

Only the smallest disclaimer tempers the writer’s jubilant words. Perhaps in the lines, which follow the above passage, the reality of the landscape filters through the gauze of “Yankee genius.” “To settle up the region which will be known as Nebraska, except certain portions of it, will, we take it, be a work of time and circumstance.”³⁴

“A work of time and circumstance” is an apt description of Nebraska’s settlement process. Even the areas of the southeast, such as Johnson County, lying in close proximity to the Missouri River, would be dependent on “time and circumstance.” Years of hard work, failure, success, and disillusionment lay ahead, but Nebraska’s first transformations were now complete. The reminiscences of H. W. Hardy, recorded in 1901, provide a summary of the landscape’s changing image. He called to the minds of his contemporaries maps of the 1830s, which showed the Great American Desert stretching across the continent from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains. He also

recounted images of buffalo, Indians, wolves and prairie fires once used to illustrate the region. For Hardy, such impressions of Nebraska's landscape were replaced only by the eyewitness accounts of his brother who crossed to the California gold fields in 1849. "We were much surprised at his statement," wrote Hardy, "that the desert was not a desert and that there was good territories for three more states between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains."³⁵ After 1854, Hardy took his place among the many pioneers drawing upon this transformed image as they began to alter Nebraska's physical landscape.

Despite the use of Native American images in depictions of the Great Plains, once removed, their presence was in many ways forgotten. The U.S. government and the region's early settlers looked out across the landscape and saw only wilderness. For Native Americans it was a land shaped by tradition. Hunting grounds, villages, and sacred sites were discernable elements in their view of the land. To settlers and government officials, however, it was a country without recognizable roads, farms, or legal organization. It appeared to them a remnant of the earth's primeval past. Native American settlements, cultivation and cultural constructs were viewed, when acknowledged, as impermanent and inconsequential. Nebraska's first white settlers faced the challenges of this landscape apparently unaware of this dichotomy of images.

Thomas Jefferson is in many ways responsible for the ideas, which have shaped our understanding of Nebraska and the Great Plains. The Louisiana Purchase, authorized by the third President, converted the region from foreign soil into a territory of the United States. The explorations of Zebulon Pike and Lewis and Clark were conducted at his

command, and it was a Jeffersonian notion of agrarian supremacy that would temper the land's eventual settlement. Jefferson also expounded the evolutionary qualities of the West that would bring Frederick Jackson Turner so much acclaim in 1893. Among Jefferson's letters is one written to William Ludlow on 6 September 1824, within which the progress of society is discussed. Jefferson wrote that a journey made from the Rocky Mountains toward the East would reveal to the traveler civilization's various stages of development, including the most primitive of states in which people could be found, "living under no law but that of nature."³⁶ Then in succession, one would find the pastoral, semi-barbarous and civilized populations of the continent. The most advanced could be found, according to Jefferson, in the seaport towns of the east. "This in fact," he wrote, "is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day."³⁷

The subject of these passages is the development of mankind, but the evolutionary pattern discussed is given the dimension of place, as if the landscape environment itself evolved with humanity. This view assumes that the lands of North America lay in a primitive untouched state before settlement and that Euro-American intervention set the process of development into motion. Alterations of the North American landscape occurred with the new settlement forms and built environments impressed upon the landscape. These cultural constructs, however, were not built on virgin land, but superimposed on a landscape already altered by Native American uses. Like Jefferson, Nebraska settlers seem to have overlooked or discounted the evidence of Native American landscape alterations, espousing a belief in a primordial land. In 1873 upon the

death of Alexander Bivens, an early settler to Johnson County, the *Tecumseh Chieftain* identified him as a witness to the county's elevation from "primeval conditions."³⁸ Willa Cather, one of Nebraska's most celebrated writers, anchored her tales in the images of prairie life she learned as a child. Cather unfolds for her readers the illusion of an untouched landscape in her book *O Pioneers*. "For the first time perhaps since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages," she writes, "a human face was set toward it with love and yearning."³⁹

Perhaps it was blindness fostered by cultural differences, which prevented recognition and acknowledgment of the Native American landscape. This failure was also undoubtedly a result of the meager documentation recording more subtle landscape alterations.⁴⁰ Yet despite these constraints, we may be able in some instances to trace the influences of Native constructs on the settlement landscape. In Johnson County this relationship can be seen most clearly in the placement of Crab Orchard, Tecumseh, and the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad. Crab Orchard, as discussed earlier, was named after the wild groves of Iowa Crab Apples that grew in the locale, but it is probable that Native American influences on the town went beyond its name. Native Americans, having been the first to recognize the benefits of the location, spent time in the utilization of its natural assets and contributed to those advantages with the introduction of the Iowa Crab Apple. The proximity of such resources was presumably a factor the selection of Crab Orchard's location as well as its name. With or without their knowledge, the settlers of Crab Orchard became beneficiaries of the Native American landscape.

Like Crab Orchard, Tecumseh owes its name and perhaps its location to Native Americans. Although Chief Tecumseh was not a member of the region's resident tribes, his name was selected for the county seat. The location of the town was favored, in part, because of its proximity to the overland traffic of the Nebraska City and Big Blue Road, which ran southwest through the area. It is probable that Tecumseh's position was also chosen because of its proximity to a second route, here referred to as the Nemaha Trail. Running a northwesterly course along the Big Nemaha River, the trail probably originated as a Native American pathway, then served as a route to the Oregon Trail, and finally emerged as a foundation for the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad.

Evidence supporting the Nemaha Trail's first phase is circumstantial yet persuasive. The positioning of Otoe villages, for instance, both at the mouth of the Big Nemaha River and later almost directly north of the Nemaha River valley on the Platte River, seems to suggest a continued use and familiarity with the territory. When Lewis and Clark were delayed in their travels near the mouth of the Big Nemaha River on 12 July 1804, Clark made an excursion into the river valley. According to his record, the prairie grass stood four and one half feet high and grapes, plums, crab apples, and wild cherries grew in abundance. His notes also describe the remnants of an ancient village and burial mounds that for Clark provided "strong evidence of this country having been thickly settled."⁴¹ Such dense settlement would have required consistent movement through the area for hunting and other purposes, resulting in the establishment of basic pathways. The most definitive evidence of the trail's native past may lay hidden within the account provided by "Maxmillian's Travels." Prince Maxmillian made his passage

down the Missouri River between 1832 and 1834. He noted that having passed the Little Nemaha River he and his companions paused for lunch at noon on the banks of the Missouri River. He described the site as shaded by high trees and wrote that, "along the bank and distant hills extended a splendid forest, through which winded a solitary Indian path, where gray squirrels were very numerous."⁴² Upon resuming their travels the adventurers passed the Big Nemaha River. The account does not mention the distance between the trail described and the Big Nemaha River, yet it provides a definite record of a native pathway in the vicinity.⁴³

The passageway along the banks of the Big Nemaha River was not made famous by connecting Native village sites nor would it find acclaim as an alternate route to the Oregon Trail. It is not recorded as a subsidiary route in most of the general records or maps of that famous trail. In *Overland in 1846, Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, however, the diary of Nicholas Carriger is used to trace the route. Travelers apparently passed along the Nemaha below what became Falls City and followed the river northwest, passing near the present day Johnson County towns of Elk Creek and St. Mary.⁴⁴ In 1871 the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad surveyed a route for its line to Tecumseh.⁴⁵ The railroad, when completed in 1872, made its way along the Big Nemaha River. The trail's course and width were undoubtedly altered by the passage of oxen, wagons, and horses moving west during its second phase and was hidden by the steel rails of its third. Yet the foundation of the trail must surely lay in the footsteps of the Native Americans of that region. Hence, one may conclude that the subsequent location of Tecumseh, Johnson County's governing city, and the Atchison and Nebraska

Railroad, the county's first rail line, were developed on the foundation of this Native American construct.

Nebraska's settlement landscape has concealed much of the region's Native American past, but before the territory could be opened, the image of the Great Plains had to be altered. First envisioned only in imagination, America awaited the explorations of Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Pike to define the future of the region. Pike's descriptions of the arid southwest were also applied to the vast prairies of the Central and Northern Plains. Seen only as a great desert, the land was set aside to contain all the displaced Native American tribes of the east. Lewis and Clark, however, had recorded images of a land full of agricultural possibilities and soon people moving toward the Far West began to embrace their vision. No longer a desert, it then became a land of unlimited potential. The U. S. government, from the standpoint of settlers, made perhaps the most significant alterations to the imagery of the Nebraska landscape. Beginning with the removal of the Otoe and Missouri tribes and the legal organization of the territory for settlement, the government began to "empty" the countryside. The Native American landscape, as it had been known, ended and the settlement landscape began to emerge. Trails and town sites, in many instances, were superimposed over those established by Indian communities. Contact with these displaced societies and the artifacts of their cultural history, however, failed to impress such facts on the minds of settlers. They held fast to the image of an empty land, a land that lay untouched by the ephemeral societies of Native Americans so newly departed to the reservations. In the words of Philip Pregill and Nancy Volkman, "we can only regret how much landscape

knowledge and practice of great value was lost in the rush to transform the Amerindian subsistence landscape into the Euro-American pastoral paradise.”⁴⁶ It is a scholar’s lament. For Nebraska settlers, the only knowledge required was that of their own supremacy. With such wisdom in hand, they could overcome the endless work and deprivations they faced, and build the towns and counties of a new state.

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- ¹ Lyman Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1973), 71-74.
- ² David Agee Horr, ed., *Oto and Missouri Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), 20-22.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 20-22, 30-33.
- ⁴ Duane Champagne, ed., *Chronology of Native American History From Pre-Columbian Times To The Present* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1994), 70.
- ⁵ Horr, *Otoe and Missouri Indians*, 21-22, 30-33.
- ⁶ Philip Pregill and Nancy Volkman, *Landscapes in History: Design and Planning in the Western Tradition* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 298.
- ⁷ Melvin R. Gilmore, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 4.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁹ Howard R Lamar, ed., *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1977), 808.
- ¹⁰ David J. Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 17.
- ¹¹ John Bradbury, "Bradbury's Travels in the Interior of America 1809-1811," in *Early Western Travels 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 5:78-79.
- ¹² Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness*, 16.
- ¹³ Thurman Wadley, "The Corson Creek Earth Mound," typescript, Johnson County Historical Society, Tecumseh, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to JCHS), 1.
- ¹⁴ Native American Pottery, Accession #62-A, 1-4; Flint Point, Accession #37-D; Artifact Catalog, JCHS.
- ¹⁵ Gilmore, *Uses of Plants*, 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁸ Elton A Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* revised edition (Lincoln: J & L Lee Co., 1995), 108; Lilian L. Fitzpatrick, *Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 83.

¹⁹ "Treaty with the Oto and Missouri Indians March 15, 1854," in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 87-88.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Memoirs Compiled by Johnson County students, 1922-23," JCHS; Luanna McDougal memoir; Mrs. Hoot memoir; Mrs. Knowles memoirs; Mr. Murphy memoir; Mrs. McLaughlin memoir; Mrs. Ward memoir.

²² McDougal memoir.

²³ Champagne, *Chronology of Native American History*, 228.

²⁴ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1-5.

²⁵ James P. Ronda, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West: From Conquest to Conservation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 175.

²⁶ Review of Thomas J. Furnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies, the Anahuac and Rocky Mountains, and in the Oregon Territory*, *Edinburgh Review* (American Edition) 78 (1843): 92-93.

²⁷ Ibid., 93.

²⁸ James Bennett, *Overland Journey to California: Journal of James Bennett Whose Party Left New Harmony in 1850 and Crossed the Plains and Mountains Until the Golden West was Reached* (1906; reprint, Fairfield: Ye Galleon Press, 1987), 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ "Nebraska," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, 3 (May 1854): 458-59.

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- ³¹ James C. Malin, *The Nebraska Question 1852-1854* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers Inc., 1953), 77-79.
- ³² "Nebraska," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, 458-59.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 457.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 458.
- ³⁵ H. W. Hardy, "Reminiscences," *Proceeding and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 10 (1901), 207.
- ³⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Selections: Writings, Autobiography, A Summary View of the Rights of British America, Notes on the State of Virginia, Public Papers, Addresses, Messages and Replies, Miscellany, and Letters*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1984), 1496.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1497.
- ³⁸ Editorial, "Death of Alexander Bivens," *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1873, 3.
- ³⁹ Lucy Lockwood Hazard, *The Frontier in American Literature* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company 1972), 270.
- ⁴⁰ Pregill and Volkman, *Landscapes in History*, 323.
- ⁴¹ Ernest Staples Osgood, ed., *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 76.
- ⁴² Prince Maxmillian of Wied, "Maxmillian's Travels" in *Early Western Travels 1748-1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904), 24:110.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Del L. Morgan, ed., *Overland in 1846, Diaries and letters of the California-Oregon Trail* (Georgetown: Talisman Press, 1962), 380.
- ⁴⁵ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), 2:1007.
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CHAPTER 3

Establishing A New Landscape: Johnson County's First Phase of Construction

Following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, on 30 May 1854, settlement of the Nebraska Territory began. This current of migration had slowly built its forces in eastern cities and on the western banks of the Missouri River. Communities such as Nebraska City and Brownville soon provided a base for freighting companies, transporting goods to western forts and reservations, and they would later become centers of trade for inland settlements as well. The very nature of Euro-American culture demanded the alteration of the Nebraska landscape. Settlers required roads, farms and towns, as well as fences for crops, homes for families, buildings for stores, and courthouses for government. Each of these was a part of the material culture brought to the Nebraska plains by settlement. Native American cultural constructs were exchanged for those of American homesteaders, earth lodges gave way to farmhouses, and seasonal hunting grounds gave way to agriculture. The Nebraska sod was broken for crops in patterns unused in Native American cultivation and a thousand visible and invisible lines were laid down upon the land. A new landscape soon emerged, one modified to fulfill the needs of an emerging society.

Those settlements, which sprang up quickly in the southeastern corner of Nebraska Territory, were located on what had been Otoe-Missouri land. The early removal of tribes along the Missouri allowed town promoters to “move quickly in establishing paper metropolises. . . .”¹ Ferry services were established at Brownville and Nebraska City, where freighting companies began competing for business. Government

freighting to western military posts and reservations provided the first markets, and the gold fields that developed in Colorado required tons of supplies to be drawn across “seven hundred miles of semi arid plains to Denver.”² No one town commanded the freighters; each took its turn as the primary point of departure, and each lost this distinction as other towns and freighting companies developed. All along the banks of the Missouri River between Independence and Omaha operations began and ended, and towns grew or dissipated with the prevailing winds of fortune.³

Brownville was to grow into one of Nebraska’s premier freight towns. Established on 29 August 1854, the town was named for Richard Brown, a temporary resident of the area. The community grew quickly and soon marriages, births, and deaths were being recorded among this new population.⁴ Like Nebraska City, Brownville expected to become the Territorial capital. Such a dream was not to come true for either community.⁵ Brownville, however, did become a primary landing for boats trading along the Missouri River and ranked third as a freighting center through 1863. William E. Lass observes: “During 1858-1859 Brownville developed its own trail which joined the Oregon Trail at the mouth of the Big Sandy.”⁶ The community also attempted to expand its success with the addition of a railroad line running to the west. Its dreams, however, ended in disaster when railroad promoter Joel N. Converse failed to complete the line.⁷ Settlement did indeed make necessary a new kind of transportation infrastructure. Pony trails, traced into the soils of the countryside by Native American hunting parties and trade envoys, were insufficient for the laden wagons of the region’s new immigrants. Wagon trails quickly developed, ground out by settlers and freight wagons transporting

the goods of a market economy, while settlers and businessmen all dreamed of railroads. Agricultural products, manufactured goods, mail and the bonds of national government all would be distributed across the North American continent first by trail and then by rail.

John Boulware, who became one of Tecumseh's proprietors, was an early Nebraska pioneer and speculator. Born in North Carolina, he was one of the first Euro-Americans to settle on the Missouri, first at Fort Atkinson (or Fort Calhoun) in the 1820s, then on a farmstead in Platte County, Missouri. When construction of Old Fort Kearny began in 1846, Boulware established a ferry service at Table Creek. Following the Otoe and Missouri Treaty of 15 March 1854, in which they relinquished their claims to the western shores of the Missouri, Boulware established squatter's claims and began promoting the building of Kearney City.⁸ Nebraska City and Kearney City were built in competition but were eventually consolidated as Nebraska City.

In 1855, Boulware was granted exclusive ferrying rights at Nebraska City by the territorial government for ten years. His only obligation was a payment of \$30.00 per year and a \$1,000 bond. In return, he had the exclusive right to operate a ferry within two miles of Nebraska City up or down river. He was authorized to charge \$1.00 for a loaded wagon and one team; \$.75 for an unloaded wagon and team; \$1.00 for a carriage with two horses; and \$.10 for those on foot.⁹ In the years that followed, Boulware amassed a considerable fortune from his ferrying business, as well as from freighting profits and the sale of town lots.¹⁰

Nebraska's first territorial governor was Francis Burt. Appointed to the post by President Pierce, Burt made the long journey to the Nebraska Territory from South Carolina. He arrived at the Presbyterian mission at Bellevue on 7 October 1854. Ill when he arrived, Burt died two days after taking the oath of office and before calling the first session of the legislature at Bellevue as intended.¹¹ Territorial Secretary T. B. Cuming succeeded Burt as acting territorial governor and ordered the first census on 21 October 1854. When the results of the census were tabulated, 1,540 white men and 1,096 white women of various ages had been identified. Thirteen slaves were also numbered among the inhabitants of the six districts outlined for the census. Native Americans and free African-Americans were not included in the census.¹² The shallow Platte River, along which the Oregon Trail ran east to west across the region, became a dividing line within the Territory. Over half of the population enumerated in that first census resided south of the Platte. Political forces, however, drew T. B. Cuming and the territorial capital north to Omaha. The location of the capital in Omaha angered the southern populace of the territory and people living below the Platte River briefly considered secession to Kansas.¹³

A land survey was ordered, which began the process of laying an invisible grid across the landscape. Logically the surveys began in eastern Nebraska but before these first surveys were completed the territorial government began establishing voting districts and Nebraska's first counties. In 1855 the Nebraska Territorial government approved the boundaries which defined Johnston County and designated that its county seat be named Frances. No other mention of Johnston County exists in the documents of the territorial

government. Its boundaries, as recorded, double over themselves and appear untraceable. Yet if Johnston County was intended to lay directly to the west of Forney County, which seems likely, only one boundary coordinate needed to be altered. In 1856, Nemaha County was established, encompassing both Forney County and the ill-defined Johnston County. The following year, Johnson, rather than Johnston County was carved out of the western portion of Nemaha County. The boundaries delineated for Johnson County in 1857 have remained fundamentally the same since that time, although slight alterations were made in 1873 and 1929.¹⁴ Johnston County is unanimously designated, by the histories and place name studies consulted, to be the forerunner of Johnson County. Only a misdocumentation of boundaries and a misspelling of the name appear distinguish them.

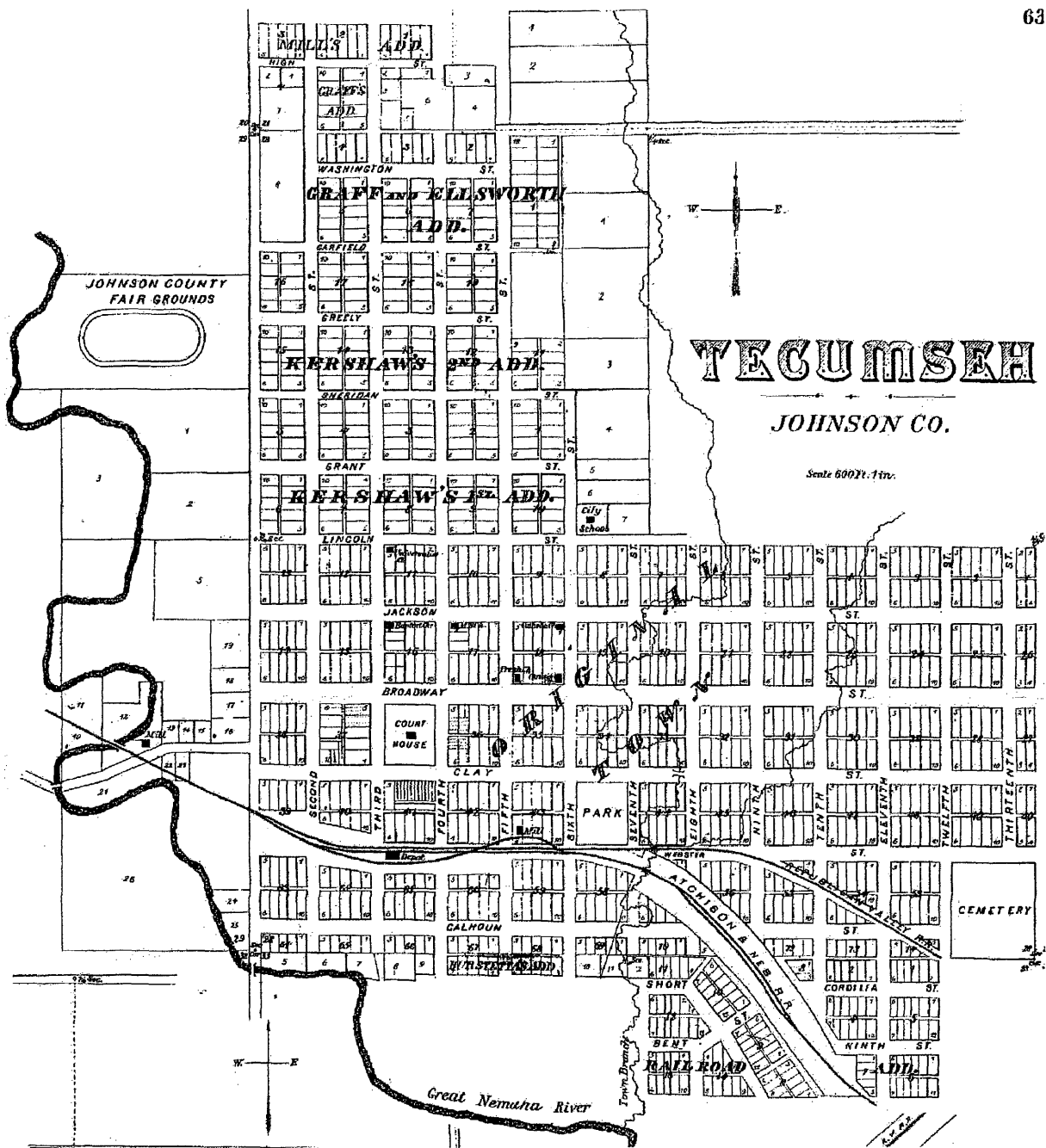
In 1875, a citizen of the county indicated that many of the early inhabitants of the area had been from Kentucky and suggested naming the county in honor of fellow Kentuckian, Colonel Richard Mentor Johnson (1780-1850).¹⁵ Johnson read for the law in 1802 and then moved quickly into politics. He was elected and served in the House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and as Vice President under Martin Van Buren. During the War of 1812, on a leave of absence from his Congressional duties, Johnson organized and led his own Kentucky regiment. He fought in the Battle of the Thames in 1813 and was seriously wounded. Johnson was credited, however, with killing Shawnee Chief Tecumseh, during that battle. It is not clear if such credit was accurately given, although it was recorded by some sources as fact in glowing and heroic terms.¹⁶

At the time of its establishment there were no settlements within the ill-defined boundaries of Johnston County and the name Frances was never used. Almost all of the histories and place name studies written concerning the county, including *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* and the historical marker set into Johnson County's courthouse lawn, indicate that Frances was the name of Colonel Richard Johnson's wife.¹⁷ The name, according to these sources, was intended as a further honor of the good Colonel. Yet John T. Link suggests in his work, "The Origin of the Place Names of Nebraska," an alternate interpretation. Link's research indicates that Colonel Johnson, despite a long-term relationship with one woman, had never married and that the name Frances must therefore have another origin. He suggests instead, that the name honored Francis Burt, Nebraska's first territorial governor, although the spelling of Burt's first name is different than that mandated in the document establishing Johnston County. Link hypothesizes that it was only a spelling error and Frances was intended to be Francis, just as Johnston was intended to be Johnson. Without providing her name, Link's research disregarded Richard Johnson's common-law wife.¹⁸ Sources indicate that she was Julia Chinn, a mulatto slave Johnson acquired as part of his father's estate. She bore Johnson two daughters and he raised and educated them as free individuals.¹⁹ Given this information, Link's conclusion appears a reasonable supposition.

When the territorial government redrew the boundary lines of Johnson County in 1857, no name was specified for its county seat, perhaps because a settlement had already been established with an eye to filling that role.²⁰ A group of investors led by John Boulware had paid for the platting of a town the previous year. They named their

community Tecumseh after the Shawnee Chief Colonel Johnson was credited with killing in battle. The town's designation may be significant for more than its connection with the Colonel, however. George R. Stuart, who made a study of place names, wrote that "while frontier regions went on disliking Indians and their names, the more settled regions thus began to use them."²¹ Johnson County, although a part of the Nebraska frontier, in this instance exhibited a trait in place names attributed to more settled regions. Boulware is said to have developed a good rapport with the Native Americans of the region, a fact that benefited his business interests during his first years in the territory, and little hostile contact appears to have occurred between Johnson County settlers and the Native Americans of the region.²² Perhaps this security allowed for the naming of Tecumseh.

As a town, Tecumseh began, like many Nebraska communities, with the investment of speculators, the platting of a village, and the hard work of a handful of settlers. In March 1856, Nebraska's territorial surveyor, Justus L. Cozad, examined the region in which Tecumseh would later be established. The townships drawn by Cozad during that early spring skirted the banks of the Big Nemaha River. In his notes, he described high rolling uplands, good limestone for building, and timber-lined streams, but recorded no settlements in the region.²³ Three months later, in July 1856, Boulware's investment group hired the Barnum & Drake, Surveyors to sketch out the streets, neighborhoods, and courthouse square of a town to be located among those rolling uplands [Map 3.1].



[Map 3.1] Tecumseh Plat Map: Official Atlas of Nebraska 1885.

Crude in their infancy Tecumseh and Johnson County grew in ostensibly sporadic bursts of civic evolution, building the town drawn by Barnum & Drake. Plated on a grid survey system, Tecumseh was shaped by its adherence to this template. Such a survey delineates property divisions and city streets in regular linear patterns and can be seen in the layout of many American towns. Craig Whitaker in his book, *Architecture and the American Dream*, notes that the country's conspicuous use of the grid survey is one of the most criticized features of "America's built environment." Whitaker finds a distinct American preference for this platting system and provides evidence for this conclusion in communities like Detroit, Michigan, and Tacoma, Washington. Detroit's original design, drawn in 1807, platted diagonal streets and irregularly shaped lots. Tacoma, platted in 1873, was arranged in gracefully curved avenues and bow-shaped properties. Despite their original outlines, both communities reverted almost immediately to grid system platting.²⁴

J. B. Jackson in a discussion of vernacular architecture writes: "there are landscapes in America separated by hundreds of miles that resemble one another to a bewildering degree. Many American cities are all but indistinguishable as to layout, morphology, and architecture. . . ." ²⁵ The earliest example of a grid pattern town is Mohenjo Daro, a Middle Eastern city from the third millennium before Christ. This community pattern has been tied to factors of centralized control and a devotion to measured designations of land; it may also be an indication of an area's colonial status. This platting system is found only in the origination of whole new towns or sections of towns. Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans all used this framework. With the cultural

collapse of the Middle Ages, use of the grid plat declined. The Renaissance brought back, centralized power, trade networks, and civic planning.²⁶ The streets of French and Spanish towns established in North America were also laid out on a grid, as “a reassuring symbol at the edge of a vast and sometimes terrifying wilderness.”²⁷ Perhaps it served the same purpose for the proprietors of Tecumseh and other Nebraska towns, established as they were on a new and sometimes terrifying frontier, while it also transplanted a built environment familiar in the east.

As railroads moved west they too platted towns, using grid-drawn street plans, furthering an impression of a landscape filled with replicate towns. Americans did not invent the grid survey plan, but cities and towns such as Tecumseh utilized it to so great an extent as to make it somehow recognizably American.²⁸ It may be that the commonality of our grided streets is not only a matter of convenience but also culturally representative of order and virtue. The symbol of the grid is its “lack of symbolism,” with every property theoretically equal within the grid and no one lot given distinction by either size or location.²⁹ The town square is perhaps the exception as it is given distinction both by its centralized placement and dimensions. It may symbolize for Americans the same commonality as the grid plat system, for the town square belongs to the community. It is a public space and often the location of the county courthouse, itself a symbol of American order, virtue, democracy and justice.

Tecumseh’s framework, drawn by Barnum & Drake, was indeed illustrative of many Nebraska towns, and though it was at this stage only a drawing on paper, it provided the dream and imagery with which settlers faced a new territory. It helped

transform the landscape, if only in their minds, into something familiar. In September 1856, Noble Strong, an early Johnson County settler, described the town being established only miles from his homestead. In his words, there is evidence of this transformation. A store, mail service, and two mills become true possibilities:

Tecumseh is a town laid out a few weeks since, for the county seat of Johnson County. It is seven miles east of where I am situated and about 30 miles on a straight line from Nebraska City, but it is 40 the way the road runs at present. There are some men putting up a store in Tecumseh and will have their things on in tow [two] or three weeks and they are to bring out the mail for all the inhabitants. So I think we shall be able to get letters every week after a short time.

Tecumseh is on the Great Nemsha (Nemaha) River, And there are one or two good mill sites there, so we shall someday be able to get our milling done there. At present there is no flouring mill in the Territory that I know of. There is a mill for grinding meal in Brownville. This is 30 miles east of Tecumseh and about fifteen miles south of Nebraska City. Our flour all comes from mills in Missouri. You must recollect that this country is only some two years old yet, and of course there are no towns or conveniences built up away from the river.

One of the gentlemen that is putting up the store at Tecumseh is a physician so if we are sick, we can be provided for if we only have the money for him.³⁰

With the land, once envisioned only as Indian Country, now succumbing to the transformative powers of familiarity, grid-platted counties, and grid-platted towns, a new wave of change began to occur. Tecumseh was built on a waterway and the town's proprietors appear to have recognized the benefits of its position, noting the site's location on the timbered shores of the Nemaha River, surrounded by lands suited to agriculture. The town site also boasted sources of stone for building, water power sites for milling, and lime deposits.³¹

Letters left by Noble Strong and his family provide first-hand accounts of the materials and buildings that sheltered settlers. Strong was the first of his family to arrive in Johnson County. His first shelter consisted of an overturned box, in which he placed his head with a sack of corn as a pillow, a barrel placed as a windbreak and grasses laid to cover his legs.³² He shared his first days in Johnson County with another settler identified only as Mr. Little. It is probable that he was Joseph R. Little who was elected the county's first treasurer in April 1857.³³ The two men, working together, made supply runs to Nebraska City, constructed temporary living quarters, and began work on a home for Little who would soon be joined by his family. Each man owned one horse, so borrowing harness and wagon, they were able to use the animals in tandem to transport provisions. Items listed in Strong's account are flour, corn, meal, rice, ham, dried apples, crackers, tea, coffee, sugar and molasses. Tin cups, plates, and spoons also were obtained at Nebraska City. Transporting all of these goods required two trips to Nebraska City forty miles away.³⁴ Strong carefully described the temporary camp, constructed by the two men, in his first letter home to Warren, Connecticut, from Nebraska Territory:

We have now got us a house, built after the Gothic style; as for splendor it can hardly be surpassed either in Ancient or Modern History – and as we are about to secure a patent, it will be advisable to keep as dark as possible, but for the special benefit of particular friends that may come into the new country, I would merely say: It consists of four crotches set in the ground – 14 by 16 feet apart and covered over very much as I have seen cart sleds in the East. We also have sticks set up around the sides and hay put on to keep out the rain and wind. We used two tons or more of hay in covering our camp. Here we can live cheaper and much better than many of the families that are living in the older parts of the country. We can cook our meat and bake our corn cake just as well as the best of them. We now make our corn meal into hasty pudding which we fry. (this takes off the Missouri taste). How long we shall live in this way I

cannot tell. We are going to put up Mr. Little's house right off as he expects his wife and son on soon.³⁵

This description of the living quarters shared by the two men is invaluable to our understanding not only the living conditions under which settlement occurred, but also with what materials it was accomplished. Straw was laid throughout their camp, creating temporary flooring that killed the grasses and foliage beneath. The cutting of grass straw is described in other letters written by Strong. It may be presumed that it was by cutting naturally occurring grasses that these two men obtained ground cover for their first Nebraska home. Nowhere in his recitation of supplies did Strong mention purchasing hay and, as the building of this first camp occurred in August, dry prairie grasses would certainly have been available. The construction of this crude structure and the destruction of foliage were among the more subtle transformations which settlement began to impress upon the landscape. Other more permanent forms of housing and landscape transformations were yet to occur.

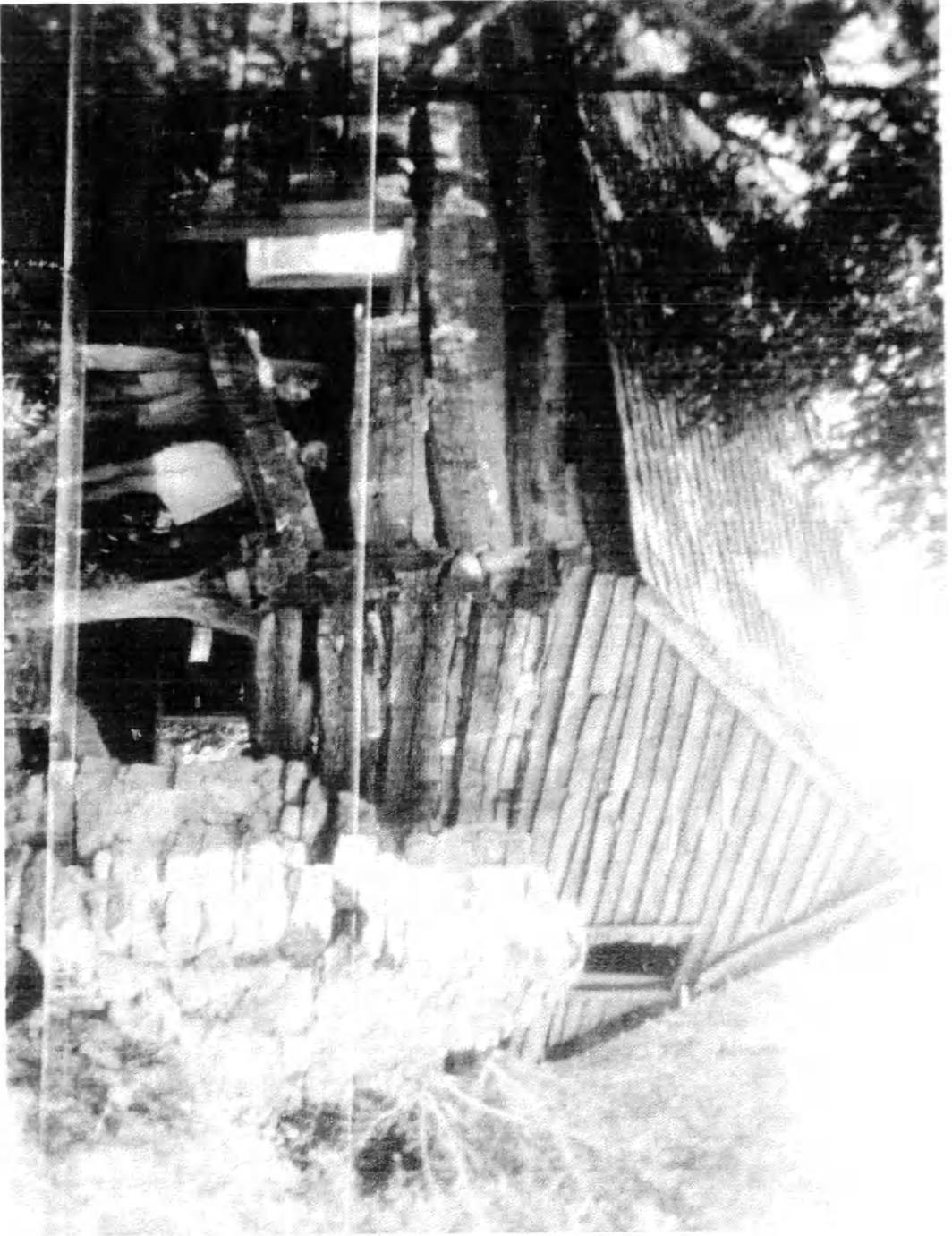
The humor, which can be read in the words of Strong's letter, is revealing to some extent, of his level of education. His quip concerning Gothic architecture, which came into vogue in the United States in the late 1840s, as well as his comment concerning the splendor of ancient history, is an indication of his familiarity with such subject matter. Further evidence of Strong's education is found in letters written by the family that reveal that he was often employed as a teacher. In 1856, however, his work was homesteading in Johnson County, Nebraska, where he was just one of the many settlers trying to carve their names into the land. He staked out two claims in the area, one for himself and one for his brother, William. Unlike his bachelor brother, William was a family man.

Noble's letters home, declaring Nebraska a land of opportunity, evidently bore fruit and his brother William brought his wife, Julia, and their children to Nebraska Territory in the fall of 1856. William and his family gave up a farm in Oxford, Iowa, approximately 106 miles east of Des Moines, to make this move. William had expressed dissatisfaction with his Iowa farm in letters written the year before Noble entered Nebraska. The farm's location lacked the resources of timber, water and stone coal that William desired. In May 1855, William's family was constructing a home in Johnson County, Iowa but on 27 September 1856, they began their journey to Johnson County, Nebraska.

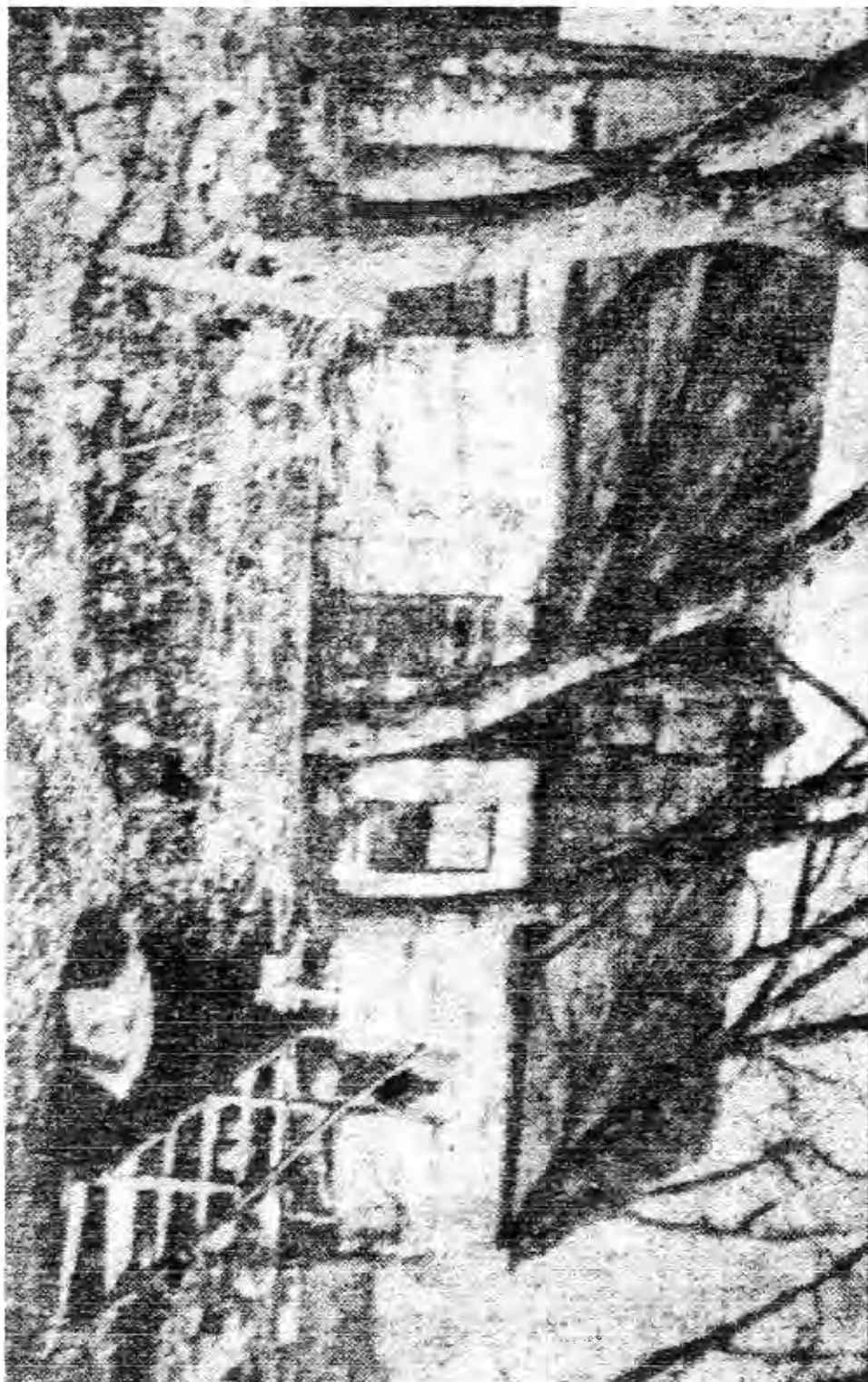
According to William's calculations, the journey took them along 424 miles of trails, although modern calculations place the distance at only 312 miles. Four weeks after departing Iowa, William, Julia, and their children joined Noble in Nebraska. In a letter dated 5 October 1856, William described their first shelter as a hollow haystack, perhaps one of the "Gothic style" homes designed by Noble. He also expressed their hope of moving into a new house within ten days. His letter unfortunately does not include a description of the house being built. Letters written a year later, in September of 1857, however, do provide a description of a log home being built for his family. Noble Strong wrote: "We have logs drawed for a house on Williams place which we want to raise as soon as convenient. . . . We also want to build a stable this Fall. Have part of the logs out."³⁶ Lime was to be burned for painting the house. The final result was a house built of logs one and one-half stories high, sixteen by eighteen feet with a main room fourteen by sixteen feet and a second room, perhaps only an alcove, six feet

wide to serve as bedroom and pantry. A shingled roof completed the building. William's family moved into the home on 6 May 1858.³⁷

Nebraska's early villages were built along the Missouri River and its tributaries. Typically, as new towns and settlements were constructed, any timber available, regardless of quality, was used to build homes, stores, and mills.³⁸ Throughout southeastern Nebraska, Tecumseh, and Johnson County, log construction appears to have been the most basic form of building. The photographic evidence representing this time period is limited. Research has identified only two discernible images of Johnson County log cabins. The first [Photo 3.1], provides the clearest image. Built in 1855, the cabin belonged to Dr. John Cochran, an early Tecumseh settler. Despite the building's dilapidated condition, the photograph provides valuable structural information, including a view of the cabin's gable end door, natural tree fork supports, and coursed rubble chimney. The second photo [Photo 3.2], unfortunately, fails to provide such information. Poor image quality hinders any true analysis of the cabin's structural form. Newspaper clippings, collected by the county historical society, indicate that Palmer Blake constructed the building in 1869. Native oak and elm trees were used to build the home, which began as a much smaller structure. Additions made in later years included larger windows and it is likely that the gable dormer window seen in the photograph was part of this expansion.³⁹



[Photo 3.1] Log Cabin Circa 1855, belonged to Dr. John Cochran, early Tecumseh settler.



[Photo 3.2] Log Cabin circa 1857, belonged to Palmer Blake, early Helena settler.

Roger L. Welsch, in studying Nebraska's log construction history, has concluded that it is a tradition that was neither "common nor rare" in Nebraska. Nebraska's settlers, he contends, seldom moved progressively across the United States but were rather direct transplants from the more wooded regions of the continent. Traditions brought by these migrant Euro-American settlers, therefore, including log construction, were unchanged by such a transitional phase.⁴⁰ The quality and quantity of Nebraska's trees, however, may have created a transformation of their own. John T. Kilpinen, noting the works of several historians who attributed the creation of the front-gabled log cabin to the Great Plains, has made a study of the topic.⁴¹ Kilpinen discovered that front-gabled log construction, in which the cabin door is placed at the structure's gable end rather than on its side under the eave, could be traced to Finnish building traditions. It was, he found, a form utilized marginally in the eastern United States but employed almost exclusively on the Great Plains and in the West. The presence of such a building tradition in the East, and the evidence of its Finnish roots, eliminates the possibility of a Great Plains origin.

Kilpinen believes, however, that the Great Plains did act as a "zone of reinforcement" for gable end construction. The benefit of this construction technique is that fewer logs are required to create the height necessary for door placement. On the Great Plains where trees were sparse and often of low construction quality, use of such a building tradition seems to have an obvious value. In the mountainous west, however, where trees are plentiful, the same building technique continued to be used almost exclusively. Kilpinen concludes that this phenomenon is due to the reinforcement that gable-end traditions received during the settlement of the Great Plains.⁴² Johnson

County's use of gable-ended construction remains unclear, yet its significance to the traditions of Nebraska Territory may be revealed in a closer look at the Great Seal of the State, dedicated 1 March 1867. Among the elements illustrated by the Seal is a settler's cabin, with a gable end door.

A thorough review of the pioneer memoirs available for Tecumseh and Johnson County establishes that log construction was indeed the region's primary building form. According to Mrs. Knowles's account of the pioneer days of Johnson County, a set of cut logs for a small cabin cost twenty dollars in 1866. At an additional cost lumber from a mill would have been required for a roof and floor.⁴³ There is some disparity in the remarks of these settlers, many indicating that the area lacked timber, yet giving accounts of cutting logs for their first homes. Among the thirteen separate stories told by these settlers, none report living in a dugout or soddie, although they assert that dugouts were built as temporary shelters within the county. One account noted that a cabin was built with an unlined hole in the ground to function as a cellar. Milk was stored in this space, covered with paper to keep the dirt out. Such precautions did not, at least on one occasion, keep snakes out, however.⁴⁴ Yet in 1857, James C. Woolworth saw coal and rock as Johnson County's greatest attributes. He also indicated that a good portion of timber could be found in areas along the Little Nemaha River in the northern portions of the county.⁴⁵ As settlement increased the area's small supply of timber was quickly exhausted, and outside sources had to be found.

The structural dimensions of the log homes occupied by these settlers seem to have been relatively uniform, with the standard log structure being approximately twelve

by fifteen feet. Two pioneers testified to having lived in cabins of this size and a third attested to having lived in a home just twelve feet square.⁴⁶ Documentation provided by the Strong family letters reports the construction of a building with only slightly larger proportions, standing sixteen by eighteen feet, sheltering a main room fourteen by sixteen feet as well as an alcove.⁴⁷ These structures were usually built quickly and with the aid of neighboring settlers. Often it seems, they began living in these homes, sheltered only by the cabin's four walls, with no roofing but the canvas taken from the wagon in which they came to the county, no doors or windows to keep out the cold, and only hard-packed dirt or planks of wood laid down for a floor.⁴⁸

These pioneer memoirs not only provide us with information on the structural quality of early houses, but also afford a unique view of life lived within the walls of their roughly constructed homes. For some they were a distinct improvement over those they had left behind. According to Mrs. W. Trulla, who arrived in 1861 at the age of ten, the log houses seemed grand to children who had lived only in small shed-like shanties in the East.⁴⁹ Sometimes when it snowed or rained, the canvas roofing used was wholly inadequate and drove families from their new homes to seek other shelter. If it could be afforded, a wooden roof would be more secure, although they often leaked badly as well. Shingles, added to such a roof, granted a still greater security against the elements and with furs hung on the walls to provide insulation these cabins could be described as "cozy."⁵⁰

The log cabins built by Tecumseh's early settlers served at times not only as homes, but also as livestock barns and storage sheds. Mrs. L. S. Otis came to the region

in 1866 with her husband and three children. The couple secured a homestead on Deer Creek, renting temporary housing three-quarters of a mile from their farm. With the walls of their cabin complete, the couple moved in. When her husband worked away from the farm, two young colts were left behind with Mrs. Otis and the children. Because in those first days they had no stable or holding pen to secure the horses they had to be brought inside the twelve by fourteen-foot cabin. Afternoons spent inside the cabin with three young children and two foals created a situation of intense worry for Mrs. Otis. Hay also had to be stored within the cabin to protect it from the mouths of straying cattle. Mrs. Otis did not note in her memoir how long the family occupied this dwelling, although they appear to have lived on the land until 1893, when they moved into Tecumseh.⁵¹

The lives of frontier women such as Mrs. Otis and Julia Strong, as they struggled to fill their roles as wives, mothers, and economic producers, within these tiny cabins were made more difficult by the isolation of the homestead environment. Only one letter written by Julia Strong has been preserved along with those drafted by the brothers, Noble and William Strong. Addressed to Julia's sister-in-law, also named Julia, this 1857 letter provides a poignant view of a woman's life on the homestead.

We enjoy ourselves very well, better than you would suppose we could, but we have got used to a new country. I found we did not know anything about a new country till we came to Nebraska. It was about as new here as it could be when we came.

There was not a house within ten miles. Our neighbors are rather scattered but we manage to see each other once in a while. There is a very good class of people about here, much better than where we lived in Iowa. There are mostly Eastern people and for the most part their first experience in the new country life. Some have seen rather hard times

this Fall, and will see harder before Spring. Most of them keep up good courage and look ahead for better times. I think this is one of the healthiest countries in the whole world. When we get our own place, and get it paid for, I think we shall be contented to stay and call it home.

I have my hands about full to do my own work and take care of my (5) children but I get along very well. Sometimes I think I have to work harder than I am able. Last summer, I worked out of doors some with all the rest. We had no fence around our crops. I had to watch that, which was quite a chore and confinement. I never went away from home, but twice, after the corn was planted until it was gathered.

When we get into our new house we will be in sight of Mr. Littles and only $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. I shall think a great deal of that for I think Mrs. Little is one of the very best women I ever got acquainted with.

I would like to see you "Wal, I would". Perhaps you will come out here some day. There are several very fine young men with good claims, but no one to bake their bread for them.⁵²

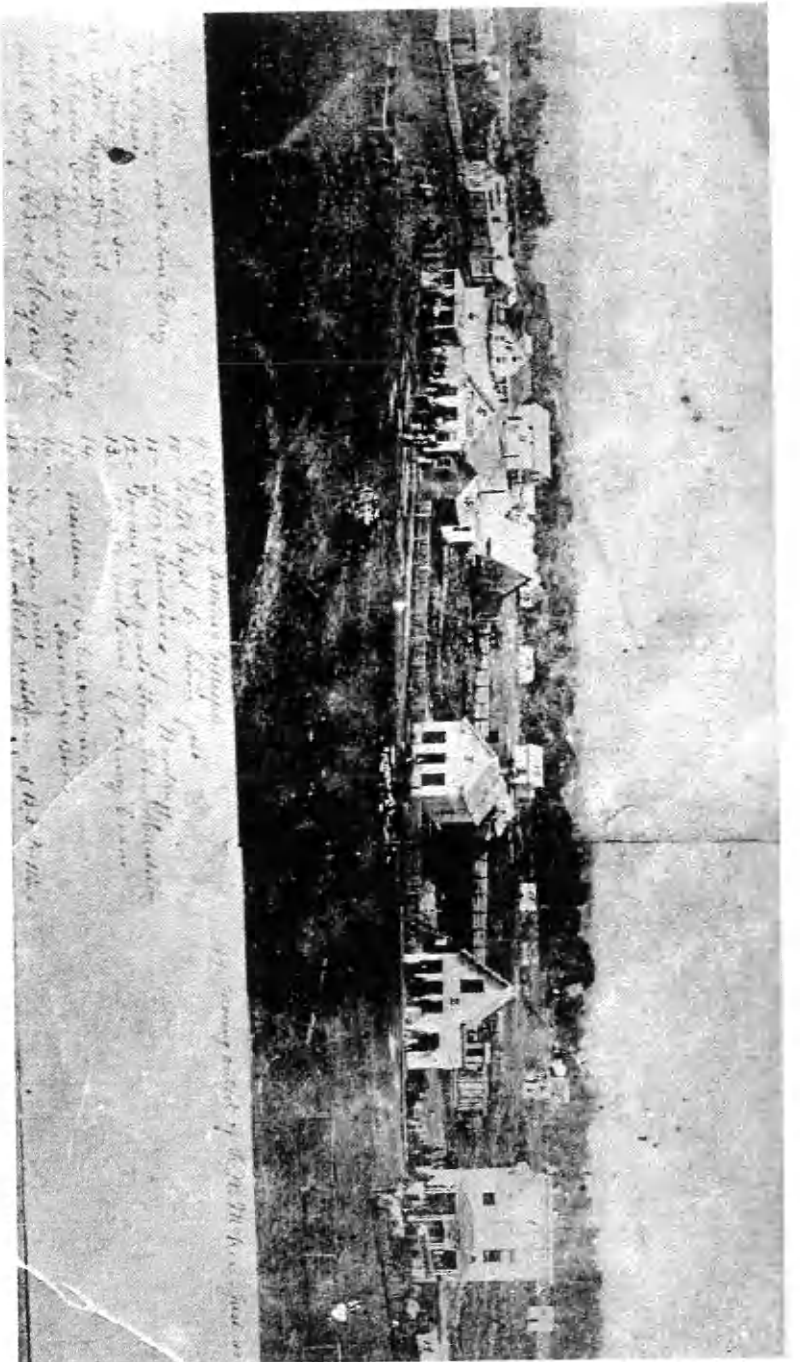
This letter and the memoirs of other women, who experienced first hand the early settlement era in Johnson County, provide numerous examples of the isolation and hardship with which they lived. Such materials also show that women were not merely participant observers, but were in fact involved in the creation of both the physical and social environments of the frontier community. These women included Mrs. Otis, who while taking care of young children and horses within her cabin, also planted ten acres of pumpkins, squash, cumpers, watermelons and muskmelons, while her husband tended crops on a rented parcel of land. Remembering some of the ways in which the family made money, Mrs. Otis noted: "One day while Leroy was in Brownville I traded a wagon – load of pumpkins for a runty pig, then I cut down saplings and built a pen and that was our start in raising hogs."⁵³ Mrs. Otis and her husband also raised chickens. He purchased three hens for fifteen cents each and she acquired a rooster in payment for

sewing done for her mother.⁵⁴ Caroline Hasenyager came to Nebraska in 1870 with her parents. She worked in the fields with her father for three years and then began to “work out,” receiving \$1.25 a week and \$2.25 after changing jobs. Despite her earnings outside the home, Caroline continued to do the laundry for her family of six, tend a half-dozen pigs, and milk the cow.⁵⁵ She married in 1875, but was left a widow within two years. “There I was,” she wrote, “the grasshoppers had the crop and I had the child, so I worked out again and rented my farm for the great sum of \$16.00. That paid the tax and paid for 9 yards of 35 cent material besides for a dress.”⁵⁶ Caroline married again a year later in 1878, to Mr. Hasenyager of Falls City, Nebraska.⁵⁷

The significance of women’s labor inside and outside the home is made abundantly clear by accounts such as these. In Jane Marie Pederson’s study of rural Wisconsin, she found that “the distribution of power in the household had much to do with the personality and character of the individual.”⁵⁸ The same might be said of the distribution of labor. Johnson County’s pioneer memoirs, for the most part, provide accounts only of men hunting, building, or farming, but one account shows men completing tasks beyond the farmyard and politics. A Mr. Blairvelt recalled that “in the evenings the men and boys would sew carpet rags while the girls and women knitted and darned.”⁵⁹ The men and boys of Mr. Blairvelt’s family also braided cornhusks that could then be sewed together for doormats. These tasks, which might be traditionally considered women’s work, were being done by men and while this fact does not negate the evidence that suggests the balance of labor was tipped unfavorably onto the shoulders

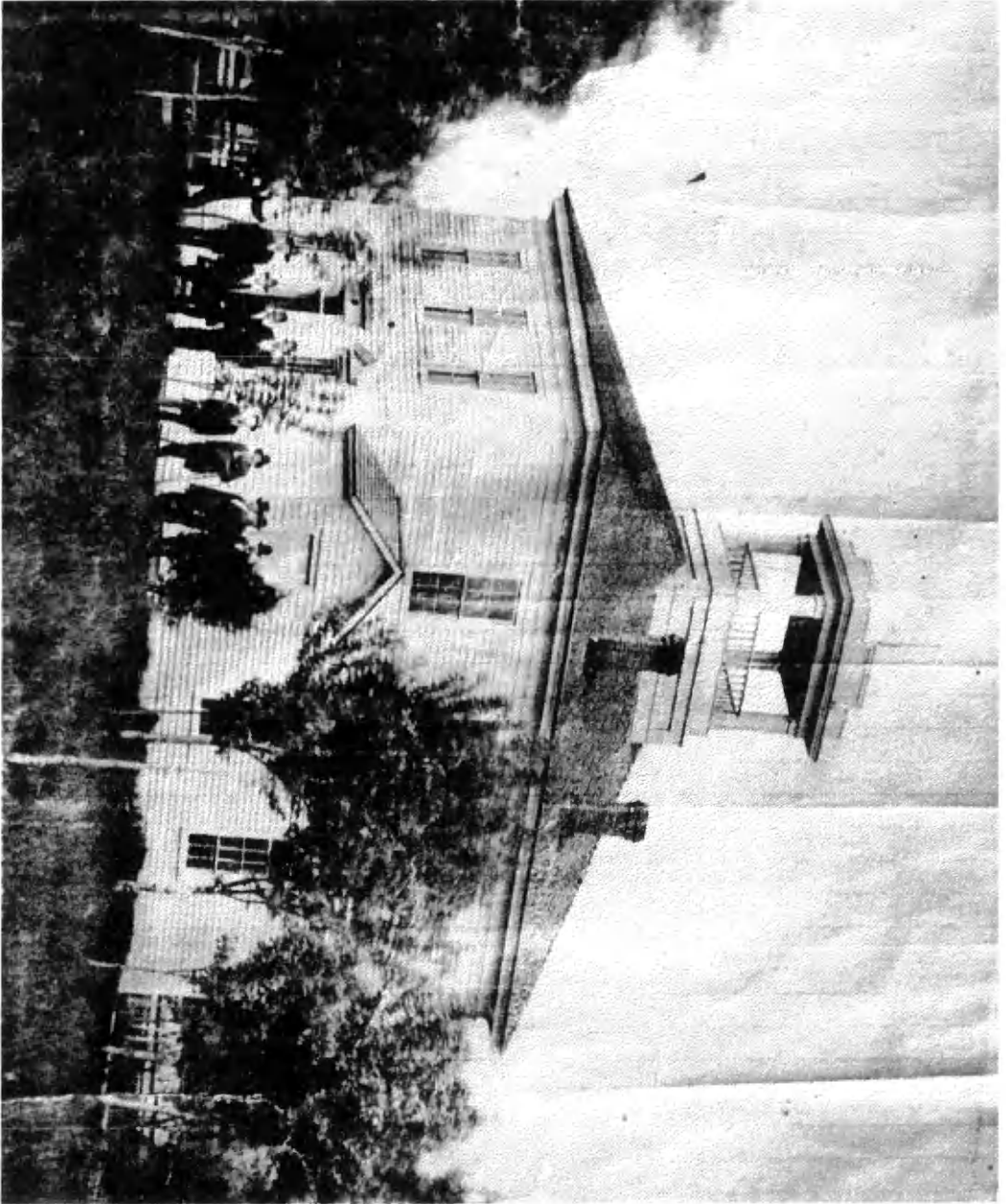
of the female population, it does indicate that individual families may have approached “accepted” divisions of labor differently.⁶⁰

The one consistent theme within these memoirs is the isolation of the homestead. It was solitude alleviated for men by involvement in county politics. William and Noble Strong were among the county’s first elected officials, as was Joseph R. Little, Noble’s comrade during his first days in the region. For women, Sunday church meetings, social calls from neighbors, and occasional trips into town, eased the loneliness. In Johnson County, Tecumseh was the first town established. It became the political center and meeting place for civic-minded men and a primary social center for women. A. T. Andreas treated Tecumseh’s early settlement in his historical account, *History of the State of Nebraska*. He described the town as having had the “crudest character, half a dozen log structures of the most unpretentious character, comprising all there was of it.”⁶¹ The log structures so represented may have belonged to early settlers like W. P. Walker, owner of the first store; John Maulding, one of the town’s original proprietors; and Dr. Charles Goshen.⁶² A photograph dated 1868 [Photo 3.3] reveals the position of John Maulding’s log house to the west of the town square. Its distance from the photograph’s foreground unfortunately conceals the structure’s details. The community’s progression beyond the unrefined state described by Andreas appears to have been slow. Nevertheless, over the next ten years, the crude structures of Tecumseh’s first era began to be replaced. One of the town’s citizens, who arrived in 1861, remembered Tecumseh as a “small village,” with “very few houses of logs and a few stores;” it was a town, “just beginning to grow.”⁶³

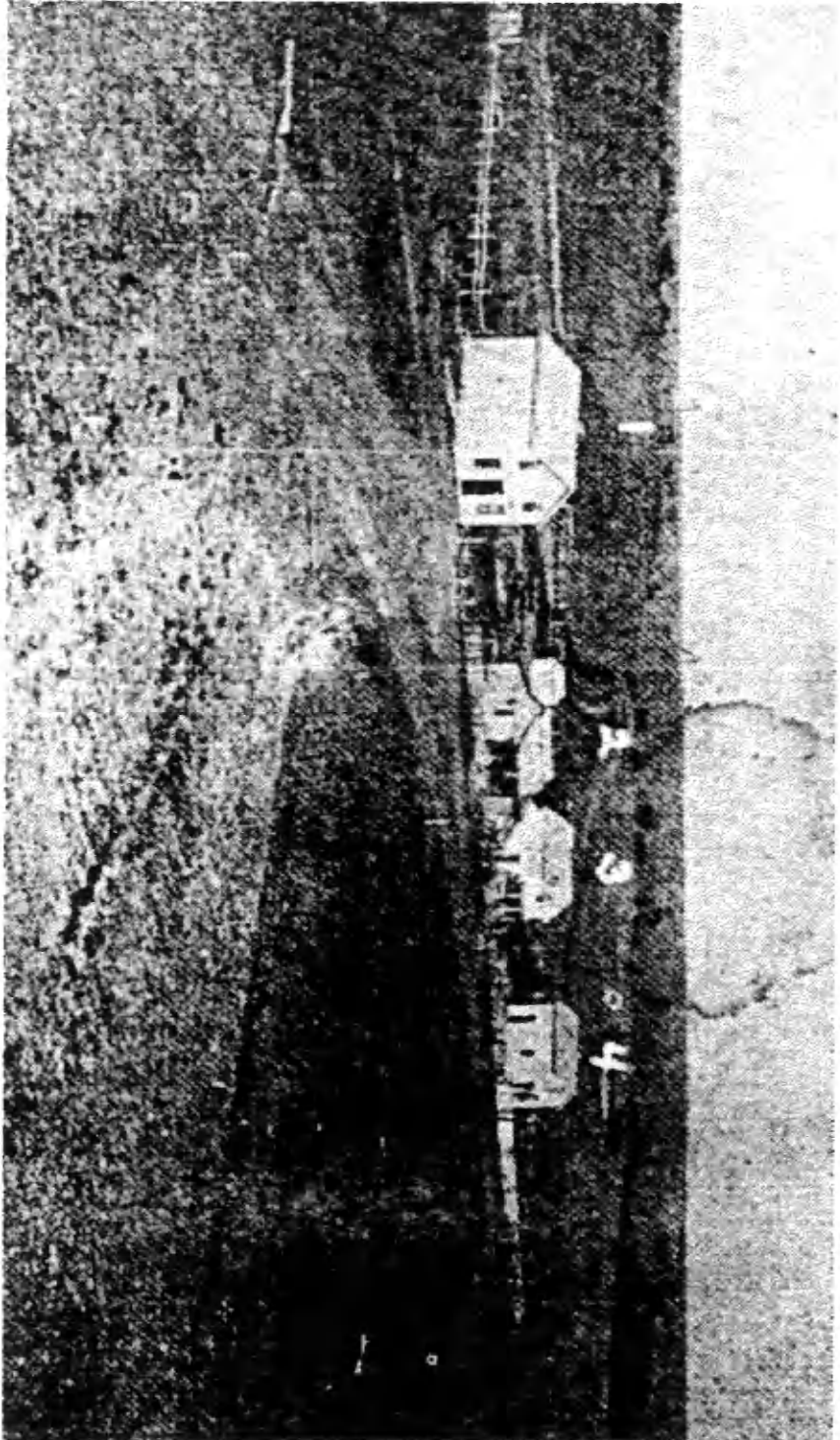


[Photo 3.3] Tecumseh Panorama circa 1869 – west side of town square. Photograph taken from top of Johnson County's first official courthouse.

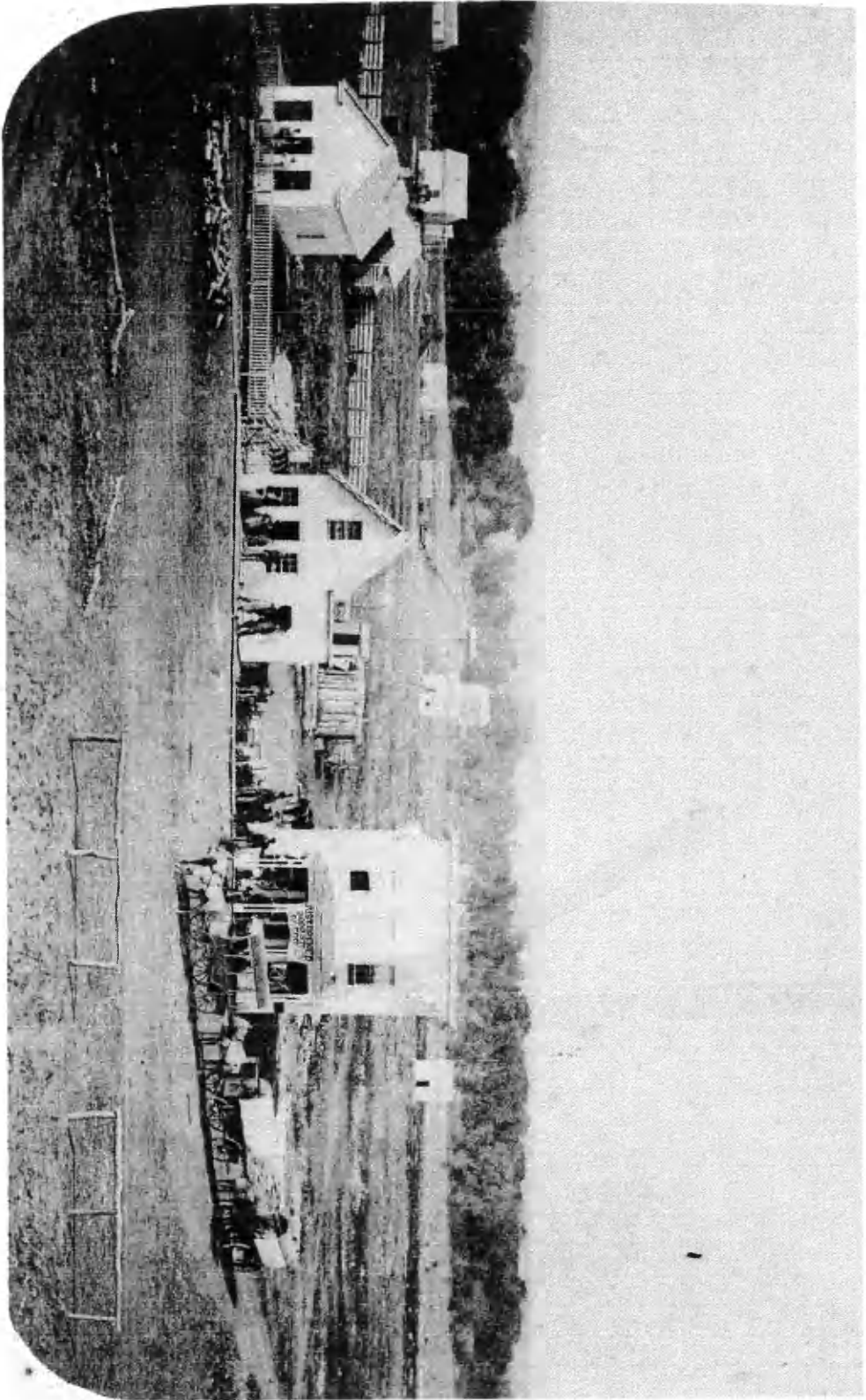
1. John Maulding log house; 2. Bivens, Howorth & Co. Mill; 3. Alexander Bivens home; 4. B.F. Perkins home; 5. Residence of I.C. Lawrence; 6. John Maulding store; 7. Sulvester home; 8. John Evans store and home; 9. S.L.F. Ward residence; 10. L.H. Woodruff store and home; 11. S.S. Rogers hotel; 12. Perking & Gillespie, attorney, office; 13. Buck & White blacsmith shop; 14. Tingle & Rhodes general merchandise; 15. R.B. Resson, general store; 16. C.R. Bryant hardware; 17. F.A. Gue shoe shop; 18. Robert Robb and Son store; 19. Hannah store and photograph gallery; 20. Graff & Ramsey general merchandise; 21. Robert McKee, just arrived; 22. Bisbee & Earlewine livery



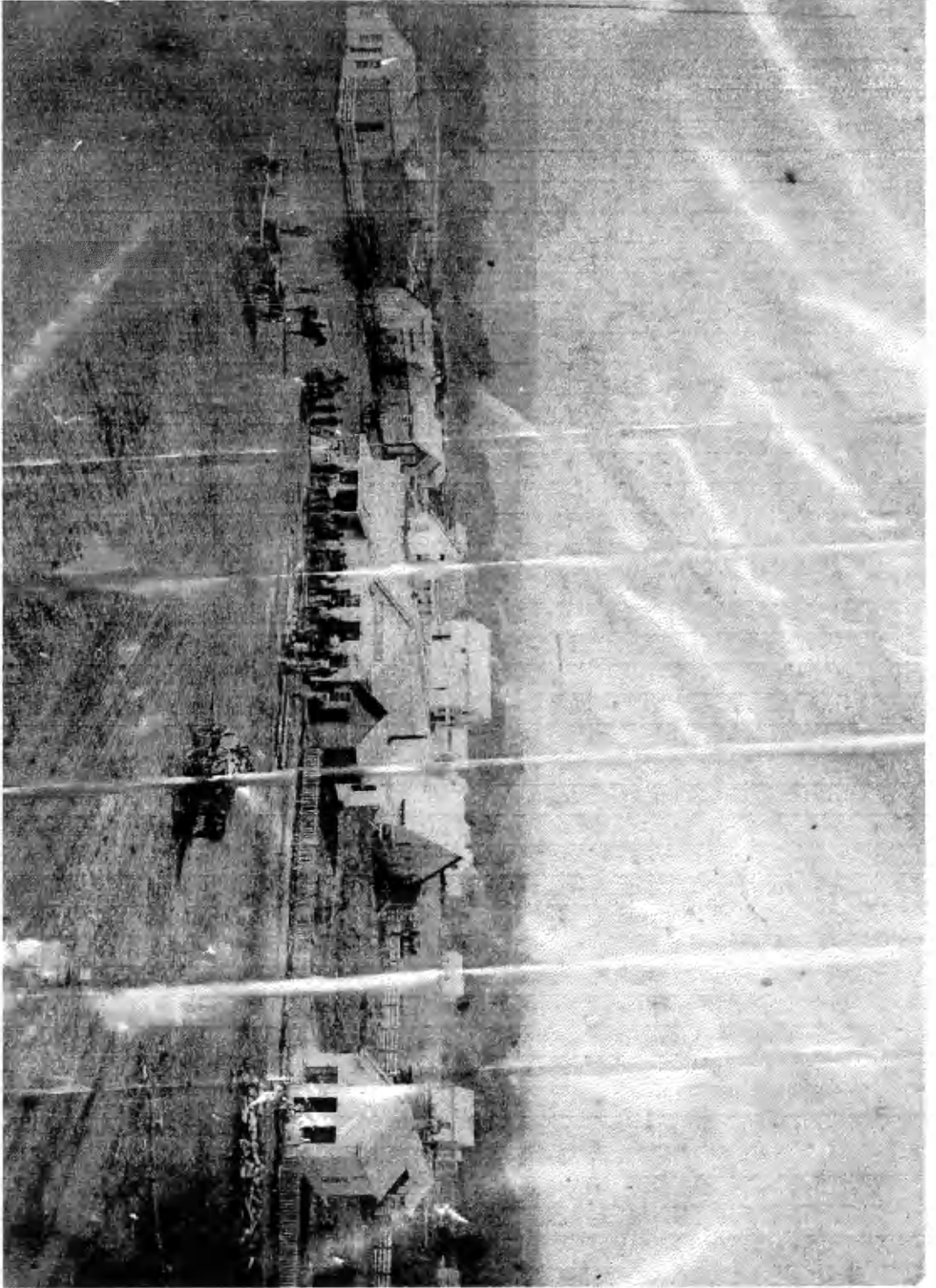
[Photo 3.4] Johnson County Courthouse erected 1868. Photograph circa 1870.



[Photo 3.5] Tecumseh circa 1869 – View northeast, Brownville Road in foreground.



[Photo 3.6] Tecumseh split panoramic view circa 1869 – west side of town square.



[Photo 3.7] Tecumseh split panoramic view circa 1869 – west side of town square.

Another immigrant who entered the county six years later recalled a town consisting of one hotel, a stable, and a business block of three stores with hitching posts on the west side of the square.⁶⁴ The oldest surviving panoramic photographs of Tecumseh's downtown were shot after the county's first official courthouse was completed in 1868. These pictures were apparently taken from the belvedere atop the structure [Photo 3.4] and the only views of the town they offer are of the west and northeast corners of the town square. Four separate photographs [Photos 3.3; 3.5; 3.6; 3.7] have survived from that time, creating an admirable record of the town. The first image [Photo 3.5], a northeasterly view of the community, shows a cluster of four main buildings, fencing, and the roadbed of the original Brownville Trail. The structures appear dwarfed and alone, framed by the surrounding landscape. Yet a shift of the camera to the west belies the image of loneliness suggested by this first image.

The three photographs documenting Tecumseh's west side include one full panoramic view [Photo 3.3], and two, focused close-ups [Photos 3.6; 3.7] of the town's buildings. At the bottom of the panoramic photograph, proprietors and businesses were listed for each building. Given this visual and written information, Tecumseh appears to have progressed beyond the humble beginnings previously described into an increasingly important center of trade by 1868. The community included eight stores, three identified specifically as general merchandizing operations and one as a hardware store. Two of the shops were identified as the proprietor's home and business, while four were cataloged simply as stores. Tecumseh's business district, at this time, could also boast of one hotel,

one mill, one livery, one shoe shop, one blacksmith, one photo shop-gallery, and an attorney's office.⁶⁵

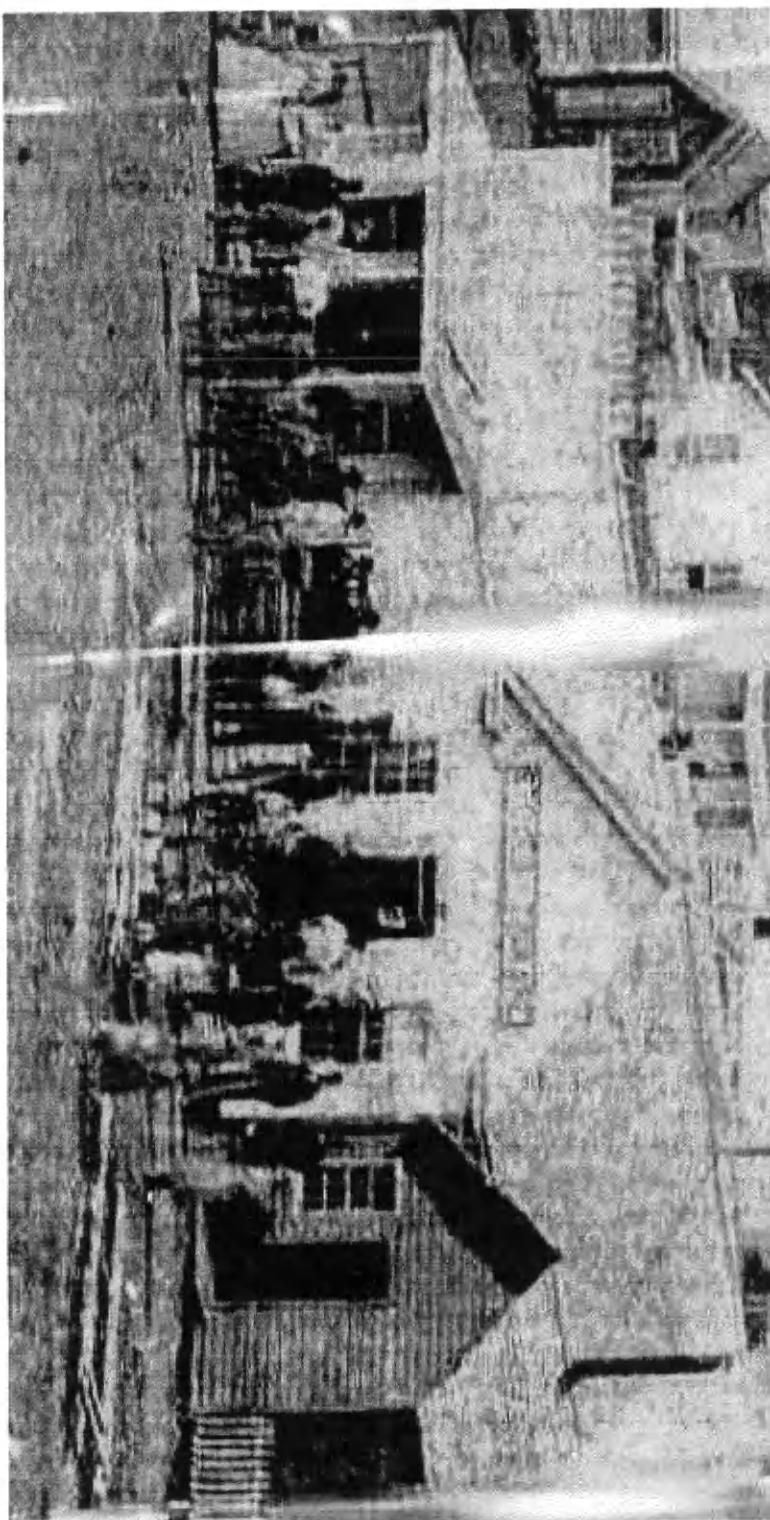
The other two western-facing photographs provide a more intimate view of the town's structures, if not its inhabitants. In the first [Photo 3.6], three prominent buildings line the street. The building on the left appears to be a simple frame structure supporting a standard gabled roof breached by a central chimney. On the front of the building, however, moldings at the roofline break the plane of the facade. This creates the image of a triangular quasi-Greek Revival pediment. In the second of the two close-up photographs [Photo 3.7] another building of this type can be seen at the center of the image. The photographs overlap so that the first building can be seen in both pictures.

The pediment area of the second structure has been used as a sign plate. Despite enhancement, this pediment sign remains almost completely illegible [Photo 3.8]. Close observation of the sign does suggest that it may read "STORES" or "STOVES" and "HARDWARE." Either interpretation seems a possibility when the occupants of the building are considered. The structure housed the hardware store of C. R. Bryant. "STORES," therefore seems an obvious interpretation of the blurred advertisement, while "STOVES," is perhaps not so obvious a reading. Mrs. Knowles's memoir, however, reported the arrival of the first assortment of cook stoves sold in Tecumseh. "The first lot of cook stoves were brought to Tecumseh in September, 1867."⁶⁶ It "was something wonderful, after . . . using fireplaces and open fires out doors. The price of one of these ordinary cook stoves was forty dollars."⁶⁷ Mrs. Knowles purchased one of these first

stoves and as she recalled, they came with no cooking vessels, despite the price.

Assuming the date she gave is correct, the stoves arrived two years before the photograph (c. 1868) in question was taken.

The center building in [Photo 3.6] also appears to be a simple frame structure with a gabled roof. In this instance, the builders have added a touch of Victorian gingerbread under the eaves, creating a more delicate roofline. This decorative detail, when considered with the pediment accessories of the two other buildings discussed, may be an indication of a certain level of stability and affluence felt among the merchants of Tecumseh. A second smaller and less elaborate structure with a lean-to roof stands along side the gingerbread storefront. The last of the three main forms in this photograph is a two-story false-front general merchandise store. A covered porch with four double post pillars forms the building's entrance and a sign can be seen hung between the center two pillars. An enhancement of the photograph [Photo 3.9] reveals that the sign reads "JUST OPENED. . . ." This structure is one of two false-front buildings in the row. The second [Photo 3.6] building, located to the left of the first, is only a one-story structure with fewer windows and a less elaborate porch. Both buildings functioned as general merchandise outlets, the first owned by R. B. Presson and the second by John Graff and Mr. Ramsey. Based on location the Presson store appears to be the older of the two, standing on the corner of the town's best developed streets.



[Photo 3.8] Close up enhanced from split panoramic view – circa 1869.



[Photo 3.9] Close up enhanced from split panoramic view – circa 1869.



[Photo 3.10] Frame Structure home – circa 1860,
Johnson County, Nebraska

Frame construction architecture appears, based on the evidence of these photographs, to have become the principal form of building in Tecumseh by 1868. Homes as well as downtown commercial structures had begun to be built of planed wood [Photo 3.10]. The date given this photograph circa 1860, was a time prior to the growing trend of frame construction apparent in photographs of Tecumseh. There appear to be two possibilities to explain this discrepancy. The frame structure shown may have been built through a series of additions to an older building or the homeowner was fortunate enough to have the timber or cash to pay the high cost of milling. A mill had in fact been established at Tecumseh by 1858 and with it located on the Nemaha west of the town square, lumber no longer had to be shipped from Brownville or Nebraska City. A letter written by William Strong in February of that year notes the hauling of logs from his farmstead to a mill nine miles away. He quotes the cost of milling wood as \$1.50 per 100 feet or one-half the lumber cut from the customer's logs.⁶⁸

An intermediate step between log and planed wood construction can be identified in the cabin of Dr. John Cochran [Photo 3.1]. The log cabin was built circa 1855 and, as shown earlier, illustrates this early period of Johnson County's architectural history very well. A second look at the cabin, particularly at the wall extending above the stone chimney, reveals the addition of clapboard siding. This addition was a way to achieve the look of a frame structure without having to go through the expense and trouble of constructing an entirely new home or store.⁶⁹ This would have been, however, only a transitional construction phase, replaced in time by authentic frame structures.

These photographs also reveal a considerable amount of wood fencing within the community. As was noted in the accounts provided by Julia Strong's letter and the memoirs of Mrs. Otis, fencing was a necessity. Settlers required fences for crops to keep out wandering cattle and to keep in stock. Familiar styles and materials of fencing would have been used first, zig zag rail fences, post and rail fences, or post and board fences were employed whenever wood was available. Tecumseh's fences appear to be of these types. As local lumber sources were depleted, however, other types of fencing material were sought out. According to Leslie Hewes: "Hedges, especially Osage Orange, became unusually important in eastern Kansas and southeastern Nebraska." Osage Orange is not native to Nebraska but was imported from Texas specifically for use as fencing. It provided a fast growing thicket with which fields and farmyards could be partitioned.⁷⁰

Unlike Nebraska City or Brownville, Tecumseh was located in a region with no navigable rivers and all the goods and materials required for the founding of a settlement and the building of a town had to be transported by wagon. In a letter dated 29 May 1857, Noble Strong noted that much of the cattle brought by settlers to the county had perished during severe winter weather. To replace his own lost cattle Strong made a trip to Missouri to buy stock in the spring. Because of the poor condition of trails to the river and with no bridges to cross ravines, he was forced to turn back several times.⁷¹ Under such conditions, roads became an obvious priority for the early residents of Tecumseh and Johnson County. In its first years the Johnson County Board of Commissioners was inundated by requests for county roads. At the county commission's second meeting on

1 July 1857, two petitions for county roads were granted and surveys ordered. In the months that followed, other petitions were made. On 6 October 1857, the commission received a petition outlining the need for a road on the north side of the Nemaha River. The petition was granted, but when the road was surveyed it crossed the Nemaha near the homestead of B. J. Baker. On 5 April 1858, the petitioners returned to the commission to protest the route.⁷²

They argued that building the road to cross the Nemaha was a needless expense for the county, as only B. J. Baker would benefit from such an arrangement. The county would not only be liable for the construction of a bridge but maintenance of the structure as well. So committed were the petitioners to the re-surveying of the proposed road that they offered to build any necessary bridges at their own expense if the road were returned to the original route proposed. The petitioners in this case collected signatures from two-thirds of the qualified voters in the county. The county commissioners complied, ordering the road to be built along the north bank of the Big Nemaha.⁷³ This episode was only one example of the politics and passion engendered by road construction within the county. Between August 1857 and January 1860 the county commissioners granted petitions for and began surveys of six county roads, including the Brownville Territorial Road. Other routes requested were thoroughfares running south, one toward Marysville, Kansas Territory, and one toward Pawnee City, the disputed Three Forks Road, a southwest roadway, and a road to Table Rock. A road connecting the Nemaha and Pawnee routes was also constructed at a cost of \$46.86. This total included the price of

the surveyor, \$6.66, the team and plow, \$5.00, the teamster, \$3.00, and the stake and flagman at \$1.80 each.⁷⁴

Tecumseh and Johnson County began as a series of lines drawn on paper, as an invisible network of grids and boundaries were laid over the landscape of southeastern Nebraska. Within the linear constraints of these political and social barriers, settlers began to build homes, farms, and businesses. The setting of all the photographic and anecdotal images discussed in this chapter is the landscape within which settlement society was being built. A look at any one of these early photographs reveals the empty space enfolding the community at this time. These images facilitate an empathetic understanding of the isolation communities established away from the Missouri River must have felt. In the case of women, the distribution of labor within the family and the remote nature of early homesteads made this isolation more acute. Bordered by the Big Nemaha River and rolling prairie lands, the settlement of Tecumseh began to develop, first as a cluster of log cabins outlined by a surveyor's plat map, and then as an expanding village of businesses and homes. Focusing on the structural qualities of buildings revealed within available photographs provides an opportunity to observe an early phase of Tecumseh's architectural development. These photographs provide a link from the log cabin stores and homes of the town's first settlement to all the changes yet to come.

¹ Melvin R. Gilmore, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* (1919; reprint, Lincoln: University Of Nebraska Press, 1977), 810.

² Rodman W. Paul, *The Far West and the Great Plains in Transition 1859-1900* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 50.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Marion Marsh Brown, "The Brownville Story: Portrait of a Phoenix, 1854-1974" *Nebraska History* 55 (Spring 1974): 1-2.

⁵ Dorothy Weyer Creigh, *Nebraska* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 52.

⁶ William E. Lass, *From the Great Missouri to the Great Salt Lake: An Account of Overland Freighting, Nebraska State Historical Society Publications*, 26 (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972), 138.

⁷ Brown, "The Brownville Story," 92.

⁸ Lass, *From the Great Missouri*, 138.

⁹ *Laws, Joint Resolutions and Memorials Passed at the First Session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, 1855* (Brownville, N. T.: Robert W. Furnas, Territorial Printer), 2 March 1855, 428-30. Other authorized prices included: freight per hundred pounds \$.08; horses, oxen or mules \$.10 per head; sheep or swine \$.05 per head; and lumber \$2.00 per thousand pounds.

¹⁰ Glenn Noble, *Frontier Steamboat Town First Fort Kearny – Nebraska City Westward Impact* (Lincoln: Midgard Press, 1989), 14.

¹¹ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 80-81.

¹² *State Department Territorial Papers, Nebraska, National Archives Microfilm Publications* (Washington, D.C.: 1955), microcopy no. 228: 10-11.

¹³ Creigh, *Nebraska*, 57.

¹⁴ “The Creation of County Boundaries in Nebraska and Chronological Changes from 1854-1929,” typescript, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as NSHS).

¹⁵ John T. Link, “Research Notes on the Origins of the Place Names in Nebraska,” typescript, NSHS.

¹⁶ James A Padgett, “The Letters of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky” *Kentucky State Historical Society Register* 38 (1958): 187.

¹⁷ Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey’s Nebraska Place Names* revised edition (Lincoln: J & L Lee Co., 1995), 108.

¹⁸ Link, “Research Notes.”

¹⁹ “The Letters of Colonel Richard M. Johnson,” 188; William A. Degregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* 2d ed. (New York: Barricade Books Inc., 1993), 129; Klyde Young and Lamar Middleton, *Heirs Apparent: The Vice Presidents of the United States* (New York: Books For Libraries Press 1969), 120.

²⁰ *Laws, Joint Resolutions and Memorials Passed at the Third Session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Nebraska, 1857* (Brownville, N. T.: Robert W. Furnas, Territorial Printer), 10 February 1857, 281-82.

²¹ George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States* (San Francisco: Lexikos 1982), 276.

²² Glenn Noble, *Frontier Steamboat Town: First Fort Kearney-Nebraska City Westward Impact* (Lincoln: Midgard Press 1989), 12-13.

²³ Johnson County Centennial History Committee, *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956* (Tecumseh: Tecumseh Chieftain Printing 1956), 33.

²⁴ Craig Whitaker, *Architecture and the American Dream* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Publishers 1996), 9.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dan Stanislawski, “The Origin and Spread of the Grid-Pattern Town,” *Geographical Review* 36 (January 1946): 108-18.

²⁷ Whitaker, *Architecture and the American Dream*, 13.

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- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 10-13.
- ³⁰ Noble Strong, 17 September 1856, Strong Family Correspondence, typescript, NSHS (hereinafter referred to as Strong Family Correspondence).
- ³¹ *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 33-34.
- ³² Noble Strong, 11 August 1859, Strong Family Correspondence.
- ³³ County Commission Journal A, Office of the County Clerk, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 13 April 1857.
- ³⁴ Noble Strong, 11 August 1856, Strong Family Correspondence.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Noble Strong, 16 September 1857, Strong Family Correspondence.
- ³⁷ Ibid.; Noble Strong, 9 May 1858.
- ³⁸ Thomas R. Buecker, "Flour Mill Buildings Structure and Style: 1854-1936," *Nebraska History* 66 (Summer 1985): 145.
- ³⁹ Therman Wadley, ed., "The Reminiscences of Johnson County Pioneers," typescript, 1982, Johnson County Historical Society, Tecumseh, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as JCHS), 7.
- ⁴⁰ Roger Welsch, "Nebraska Log Construction: Momentum in Tradition," *Nebraska History* 61 (Fall 1980): 313.
- ⁴¹ Jon T. Kilpinen, "The Front-Gabled Log Cabin And The Role Of The Great Plains In The Formation Of The Mountain West's Built Landscape," *Great Plains Quarterly* 15 (Winter 1995): 19-21.
- ⁴² Ibid., 21-30.
- ⁴³ Mrs. Knowles memoirs, "Memoirs Compiled by Johnson County Students, 1922-23," JCHS. All memoirs cited within this chapter are from this collection.
- ⁴⁴ Knowles memoirs; Mrs. W. Trulla memoir; Mrs. Henry Cearman memoir; Mrs. Hecksthorne memoir; Mrs. Hoot memoir.

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- ⁴⁵ James M. Woolworth, *Nebraska in 1857* (1857; reprint, Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1967), 76.
- ⁴⁶ Hecksthorne memoir; Mrs. L. S. Otis memoir; Mrs. McLaughlin memoir.
- ⁴⁷ Noble Strong, 9 May 1858, Strong Family Correspondence.
- ⁴⁸ Trulla memoirs.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Knowles memoirs; Trulla memoir; Mr. Murphy memoir; Otis memoir.
- ⁵¹ Otis memoir.
- ⁵² Julia Strong, 15 December 1857, Strong Family Correspondence.
- ⁵³ Otis memoir.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Caroline Hasenyager memoir.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin 1870-1970* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1992), 164.
- ⁵⁹ Mr. Blairvelt memoir.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. Each of the memoirs in this collection provides information on work and family dynamics.
- ⁶¹ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company 1882), 2:1003.
- ⁶² *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 36.
- ⁶³ Trulla memoir.

⁶⁴ Trulla memoir.

⁶⁵ A listing of these businesses can be found at the bottom of Photo 3.3, or in Tecumseh Centennial Inc., *Johnson County Fair and State Centennial: August 17-18-19-20-21 1967* (Omaha: Hochen Bindery Ltd.), 4.

⁶⁶ Knowles memoirs.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ William Strong, 8 February 1858, Strong Family Correspondence.

⁶⁹ Kingston Heath, "False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier," in *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture in the Western United States*, ed. by Thomas Carter (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 26-27.

⁷⁰ Leslie Hewes, "Early Fencing on the Western Margin of the Prairie," *Nebraska History* 63 (Fall 1982): 301-02.

⁷¹ Noble Strong, 29 May 1857, Strong Family Correspondence.

⁷² County Commission Journal A, 1 July 1857; 6 October 1857; 5 April 1858.

⁷³ County Commission Journal A, 5 April 1858.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1857; 6 October 1857; 4 January 1858; 5 April 1858; 11 October 1858; 3 January 1859; 31 October 1859; 20 January 1860; 2 July 1860; 9 October 1860; 10 January 1860.

CHAPTER 4

New Phases of Construction: Transforming Tecumseh's Architectural Landscape

In 1868, Johnson County, Nebraska, and the town of Tecumseh had been in existence for just twelve years. During that time, the initial outline of Tecumseh's civic landscape had been established, and the foundations of county growth had been achieved. Alterations of Tecumseh's built landscape, while continuous, can be viewed in three architectural phases. The town's first period of development, from 1856 to 1868, is characterized by simple frame and log construction. Its second era of growth, from 1869 to 1874, featured false front architecture and the rapid growth of Tecumseh's downtown. Construction of the Johnson County courthouse in 1868 marked the end of Tecumseh's first period of development and the beginning of its second. The county courthouse may be seen as a demarcation point between these first two phases, because although it did not fit with the built landscape of 1868, it blended well with the architecturally structured commercial buildings that later dominated and reconfigured Tecumseh's downtown during the early 1870s. Assessment records for the years 1873 and 1874 show slight increases in the valuations of property blocks around the courthouse square. These increases, however, were followed by a series of steady declines in 1875 and 1876. Rural property valuations decreased in 1874, but remained steady through 1876.¹ These years of stagnant and declining property values coincided with the terrible invasion of grasshoppers throughout the region. Settler memoirs are filled with tales of the insects' ruinous presence.² The economic impact of crop destruction during this time may have helped bring to a close Tecumseh's second era of growth. No further concentrated

expansion seems to have been initiated until the 1880s when the county entered its third phase of development. This final era of growth developed more slowly than the previous two, covering an interval of twenty years, from 1880 to 1900. New communities were established within the county during this period, and Tecumseh's downtown became a more modern setting for the county's civic and economic business. Building within Tecumseh continued after 1900 and the populations of most Johnson County communities did not reach their peak until later, yet in many ways these seem to have been only the residual effects of important alterations made between 1880 and the end of the century.³

JOHNSON COUNTY POPULATION:⁴

1857	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900
<i>170</i>	<i>528</i>	<i>3,429</i>	<i>7,595</i>	<i>10,333</i>	<i>11,197</i>
1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960
<i>10,187</i>	<i>8,940</i>	<i>9,157</i>	<i>8,662</i>	<i>7,251</i>	<i>6,281</i>

Johnson County Peak Population - **1900:** *11,197*

COMMUNITY PEAK POPULATIONS:

COOK – **1910:** *387*

CRAB ORCHARD – **1920:** *278*

ELK CREEK – **1900:** *347*

GRAFF – **1910:** *150*

HELENA – *LOST POST OFFICE 1891*

SAINT MARY / SMARTVILLE – **1910: 100**

STERLING – **1920: 804**

TECUMSEH – **1940: 2,104**

VESTA – **1930: 252**

POPULATION 1990:

JOHNSON COUNTY – **1990: 4,613**

TECUMSEH - **1990: 1,702**

On 27 September 1873, a resident of Sterling, Nebraska, one of the developing towns of Johnson County, addressed the following lines to the editor of the *Tecumseh Chieftain*:

We have reached home at last, after two days visit among friends in Tecumseh. To say Tecumseh is growing does not do her half the justice she deserves, and in as much as we can find no words to better express ourselves in regard to her rapid increase in size and population, we will have to let “growing” suffice.⁵

This anonymous letter writer referred to a “rapid increase” in Tecumseh’s size and population. Evidence of this growth can be seen in three distinct changes, which had recently occurred within Tecumseh’s built landscape. The first and most obvious of these changes was the number of buildings that lined the town’s thoroughfares. Where once only a handful of merchants plied their trade, dozens of storefronts now crowded together around the square. Spatial patterns within Tecumseh were altered by this increased construction, thereby creating a second characteristic alteration. A complete transition from log construction to false-front architecture appears to have created a third and final,

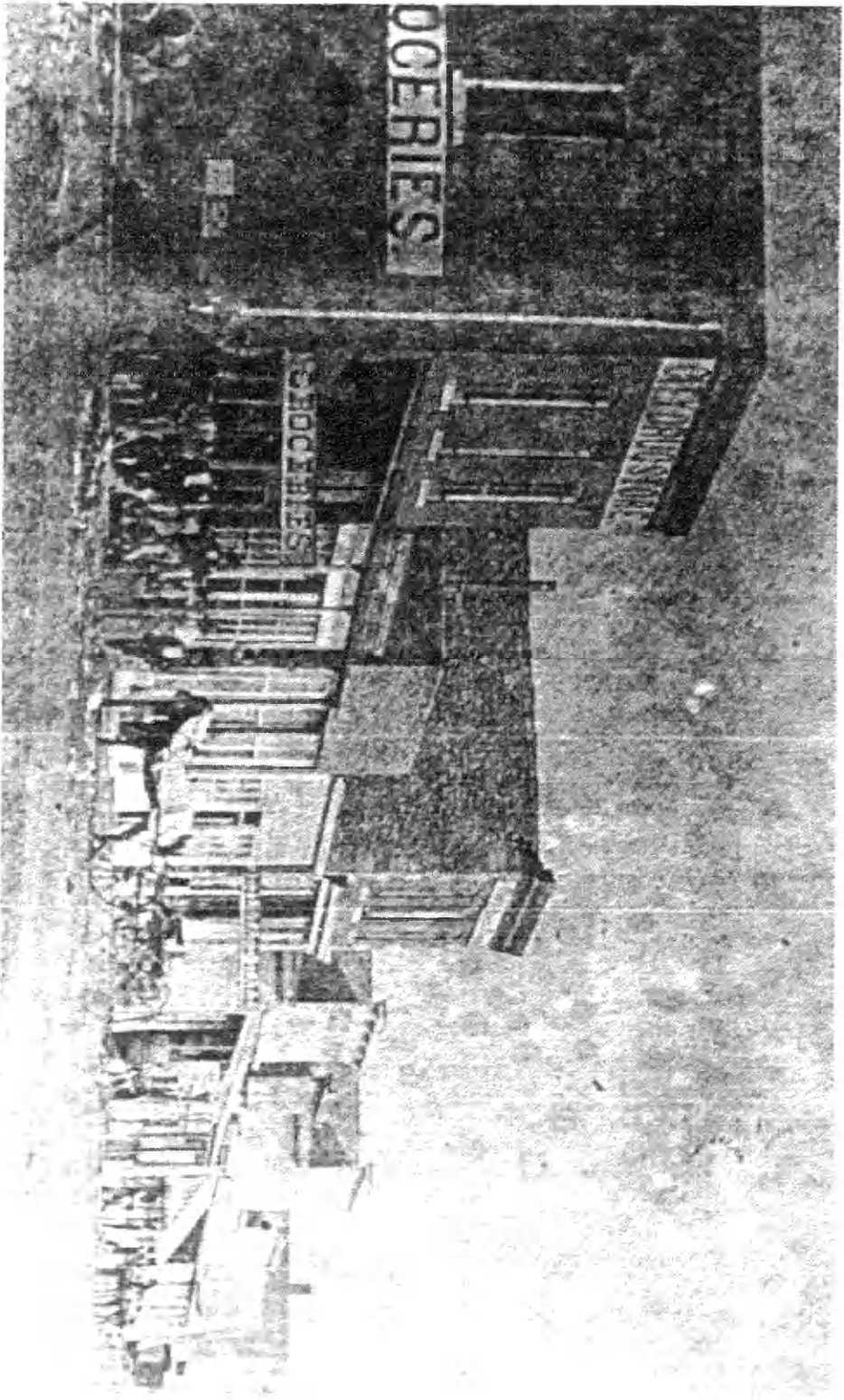
type of architectural transition during this second phase of development. Indeed, false-front commercial architecture, which had just begun to be used in Tecumseh's built environment in 1868, dominated the community's townscape during the 1870s. Photographs, assessment records, and newspaper advertisements provide primary documentation for this era of growth.

Budding with enthusiasm, the author of that 1873 letter to the *Tecumseh Chieftain* went so far as to declare that Tecumseh was "rapidly progressing and putting on the features of a mighty city."⁶ If the community had been compared to any number of eastern cities at this time, such effusive language might have been considered ridiculous. If, however, comparisons were drawn only to Tecumseh's built environment during the first phase of development, the sentiment, if not the reality, of the statement might have been appropriate. Tecumseh's municipal growth during this era is reflected most prominently in the number of new buildings. Photographs of the town's northern and western downtown commercial blocks, developed in 1868 show approximately sixteen businesses spread out across the whole town grid, as discussed in chapter three, while 1870s era photographs [Photos 4.1; 4.2], reveal twenty-one commercial structures. Other downtown property blocks were developed during this era as well.⁷

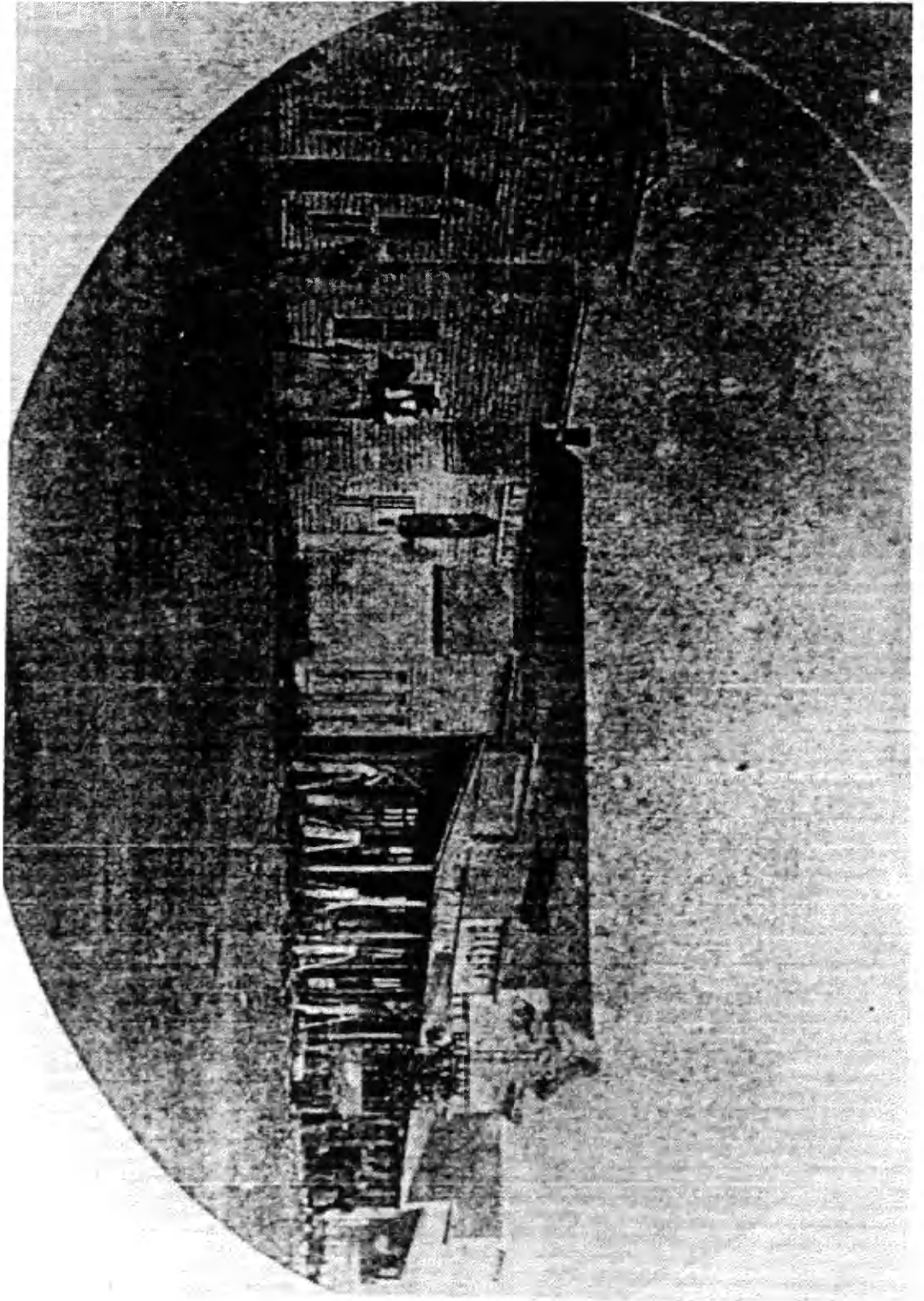
Advertisements found in the *Tecumseh Chieftain* during this period also show an increase in the number of businesses and professional services available within the community. On 27 September 1873, this newspaper ran advertisements for three attorney/land agents and one for the Russell and Holmes Bank and Land Agency. Russell and Holmes had constructed the first brick building in Tecumseh in 1872 on the

corner of Third and Clay streets.⁸ Seven physicians and surgeons claiming specialization in everything from the diseases of women and obstetrics to chronic diseases and surgery also were listed. Four churches, all Protestant, and five fraternal orders, including two International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) and two Mason's lodges, are evident from meeting announcements. The services of a meat market, bakery, and blacksmith were advertised, as were the amenities of the Sherman House, which was located on the south side of the Public Square and provided rooms and stable accommodations for travelers. This hotel also served as a stage stop for the Sullivan and Cornell Stage Line, which made regular trips to Table Rock and Pawnee City. Reaching Tecumseh in 1872, the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad advertised its services in the *Tecumseh Chieftain* as well.⁹

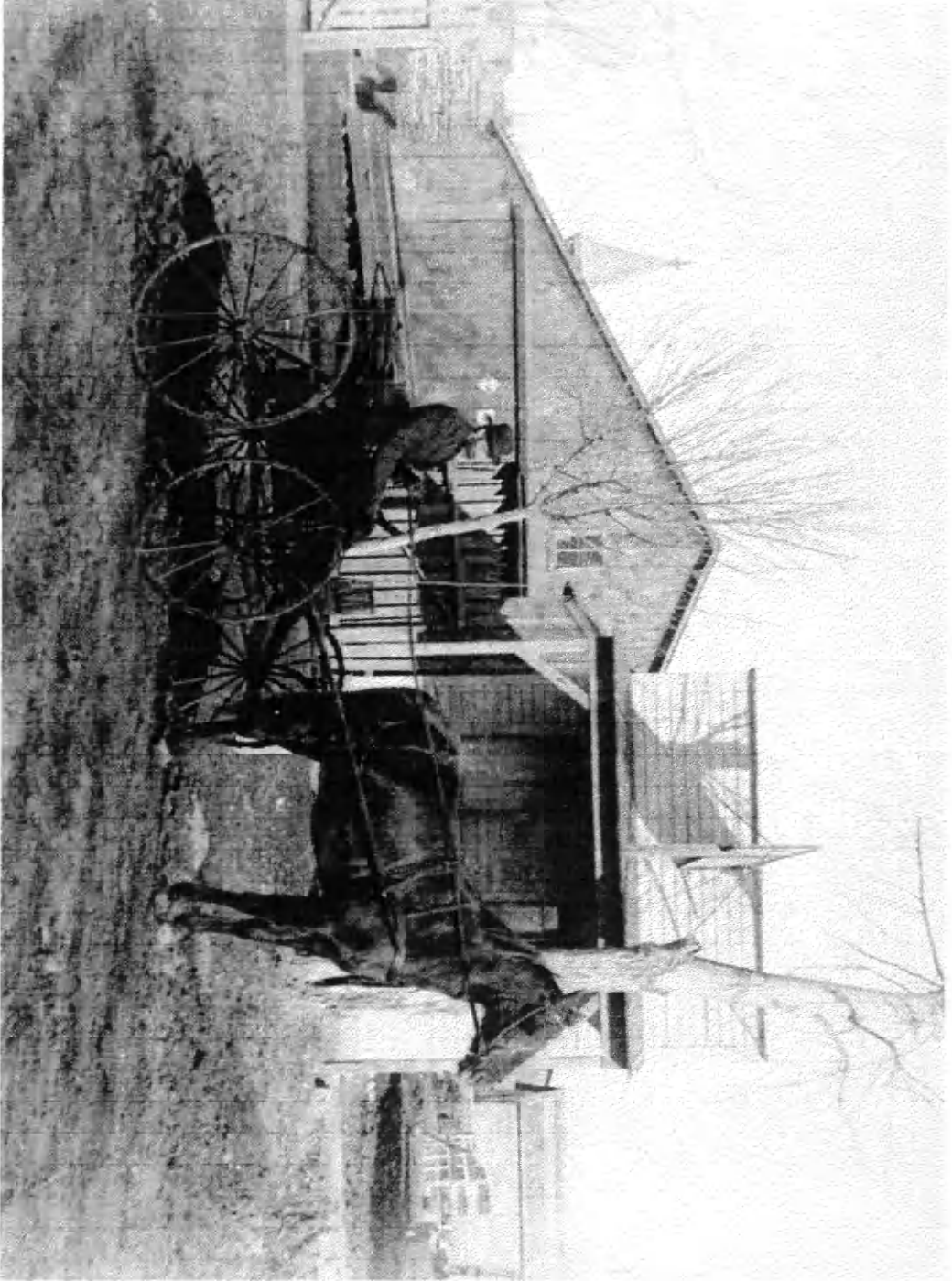
Two other advertisements from the pages of the *Tecumseh Chieftain* are particularly noteworthy. Each is an announcement of available lumber. On 27 September 1873, the Tecumseh Lumber Yard invited buyers to look over their stock and prices. Within the same issue, the Chicago Lumber Company, also of Tecumseh, advertised its line of timber products as well.¹⁰ An 1885 photograph of W.H. Hassett posed in front of his lumberyard [Photo 4.3] reveals what these businesses may have looked like at the time. (Chicago-based lumber firms were the chief source of lumber for settlements in the Plains into the 1880s).¹¹ These two advertisements may also show the availability of planed wood that became so important to Tecumseh's era of false-front construction.



[Photo 4.1] Tecumseh, West Side of the town square – circa 1873.



[Photo 4.2] Tecumseh, North Side of the town square – circa 1874.



[Photo 4.3] W. H. Hassett proprietor of lumberyard – circa 1885.

Catalysts for this new building period undoubtedly included the arrival of rail service and increases in the community's population. Implementation of the Homestead Act in 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865 also helped stimulate these changes. The Homestead Act paved the way for further settlement and agricultural production throughout the Plains, yet the nation's population was unable to respond to the call of the West until the close of that terrible conflict. Eighty-six percent of the original 241,920 acres of public lands within Johnson County were unclaimed at the beginning of 1863 and at the beginning of 1865 approximately 75 percent still remained available. Homestead filings, however, increased dramatically after 1865, rising from 1,600 acres claimed in 1864 to 19,880 acres in 1865 and 27,040 acres in 1866. Filings reached their peak in Johnson County in 1867, when a total of 29,800 acres were claimed through homestead filings as well as cash entries, and military and agricultural script. By 1878, all of the public lands within Johnson County had finally passed into private hands.¹²

The end of the Civil War and the implementation of the Homestead Act, however, were not the only components important to the growth of the area during this period. Another important development was the completion of the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad in 1872. In 1869, a rail line was surveyed through the county to run from Nebraska City to Kansas but it failed to materialize. During 1872 another rail line was surveyed across the county. Johnson County voters approved a \$100,000 bond issue for the Brownville, Fort Kearny and Pacific Railroad, which was to run from Brownville to Fort Kearny. Yet only the first ten miles of track along this route were ever laid and the county never paid out the funds approved for the enterprise. In 1871, the Atchison and

Nebraska Railroad surveyed its line through the area, with a stop at Tecumseh, and again Johnson County voters approved a \$100,000 bond issue to support construction.¹³ The Atchison and Nebraska line succeeded where others had failed, and on 25 April 1872 it began service to Tecumseh. The railroad also provided trains to Kansas City where passengers could meet connecting trains to the east and service was provided to Lincoln, Nebraska, bringing the state capital within the reach of Johnson County.¹⁴

Construction of Johnson County's first jail began in 1872. Built of limestone quarried four and one half miles west of Tecumseh near Yankee Creek, the facility provided two cells on the ground floor and a residence for the county sheriff on the second floor. An outside wooden staircase led to the sheriff's residence. Thurman Wadley, author of a short history of the jail, believed that cannon balls might have been inserted into hollowed out sections within the limestone blocks as a preventive measure against escapes.¹⁵ The collections of the Johnson County Museum include one small cannon ball; unfortunately, the museum's records do not indicate where the item was found, or if it had any relation to the county jail. Neither the reports of the county commission nor available newspaper accounts provide any evidence of increased crime during this period that may have promoted the construction of this facility.

New buildings, new materials, and new architectural standards were quickly embraced during this era, as residents moved to leave behind their sense of frontier living. Indeed, beyond the surface evidence of the era's new construction, photographs show the changes in spatial patterning that also occurred. Yards and fences are no longer seen separating downtown stores. Buildings are wedged together, utilizing every inch of

valuable downtown property. The result is an elimination of space-space that once allowed the expansive vistas of Johnson County's prairies to be part of the experience of Tecumseh's business district. With this change in spatial patterning, the viewer's focus is drawn into the town rather than away from it. This was a pattern of development grounded in the familiar urban centers of the East, and its utilization may have provided settlers a more complete sense of order as well as a false impression of urban prosperity.¹⁶

The architectural style employed during this second era of construction may also have supported such impressions of order and urbanity. Thirteen of the twenty-one buildings evident in the photographs of Tecumseh in the 1870s appear to be classically formed wooden false-front structures. Four brick structures also appear within these photographs, one of which stylistically mimics the wooden false-fronts surrounding it. This dominance of false-front architecture seems to indicate a common desire to differentiate between commercial and residential buildings and districts as was practiced in more urban settings. The regular linear patterning involved in false-front construction may have magnified for settlers and travelers the sense of order that would have been inherent for them in the existence of the town itself.¹⁷

Vertical construction lines created storefront surfaces and extended them beyond the building's roofline. The extension of the vertical plane provided a false image of size. It is from the fallacy of this image that the false-front building form earned its name. The perceived size of these buildings, false as it was, may have provided settlers a sense of confidence and prosperity. Horizontal lines, contributed by wooden siding,

perhaps enhanced this comforting image of refined structure. The appearance of such compressed vertical and horizontal images, when combined with the elimination of space between buildings, may have bolstered the community's sense of an enclosed environment. Kingston Heath has suggested that such a sense of enclosure might have provided a psychological comfort to those facing the expansive vistas of Montana and the same may be true for settlers unfamiliar with the rolling prairies of Nebraska and Johnson County. In Tecumseh's frontier setting, perhaps such patterns provided a subconscious feeling of control, as though in the battle of man against nature, waged daily on the Plains, man was actually winning.¹⁸

Tecumseh's transition from informal frame vernacular construction to the more stylized forms of false front architecture had not long been accomplished before a third phase of architectural development began. The use of more permanent building forms such as brick and stone masonry began replacing the community's wooden false-fronts. This transition began slowly and was not accomplished overnight. The last of Tecumseh's Victorian-style commercial structures would not be complete until the early twentieth century. During this third era, railroad expansion changed the look and location of communities throughout Johnson County. Railroad maps and town chronologies, as well as newspapers and city documents, provide evidence of this period of growth. Throughout the 1880s, optimism and speculation ran high in both urban and rural regions of the Midwest.¹⁹ Tecumseh, it seems, was not immune to the assertions of such community boosterism and the zeal for progress born in the prosperous 1880s carried on through the depression of the 1890s and into the new century. The doctrines

of these dream weavers can be read in newspapers and speeches delivered at this time as well as in the architectural transformation of Tecumseh's downtown. Tecumseh's built landscape stands as perhaps the most lasting product of this third period of development, and its architectural styling reveals it to be a true product of the nineteenth century.

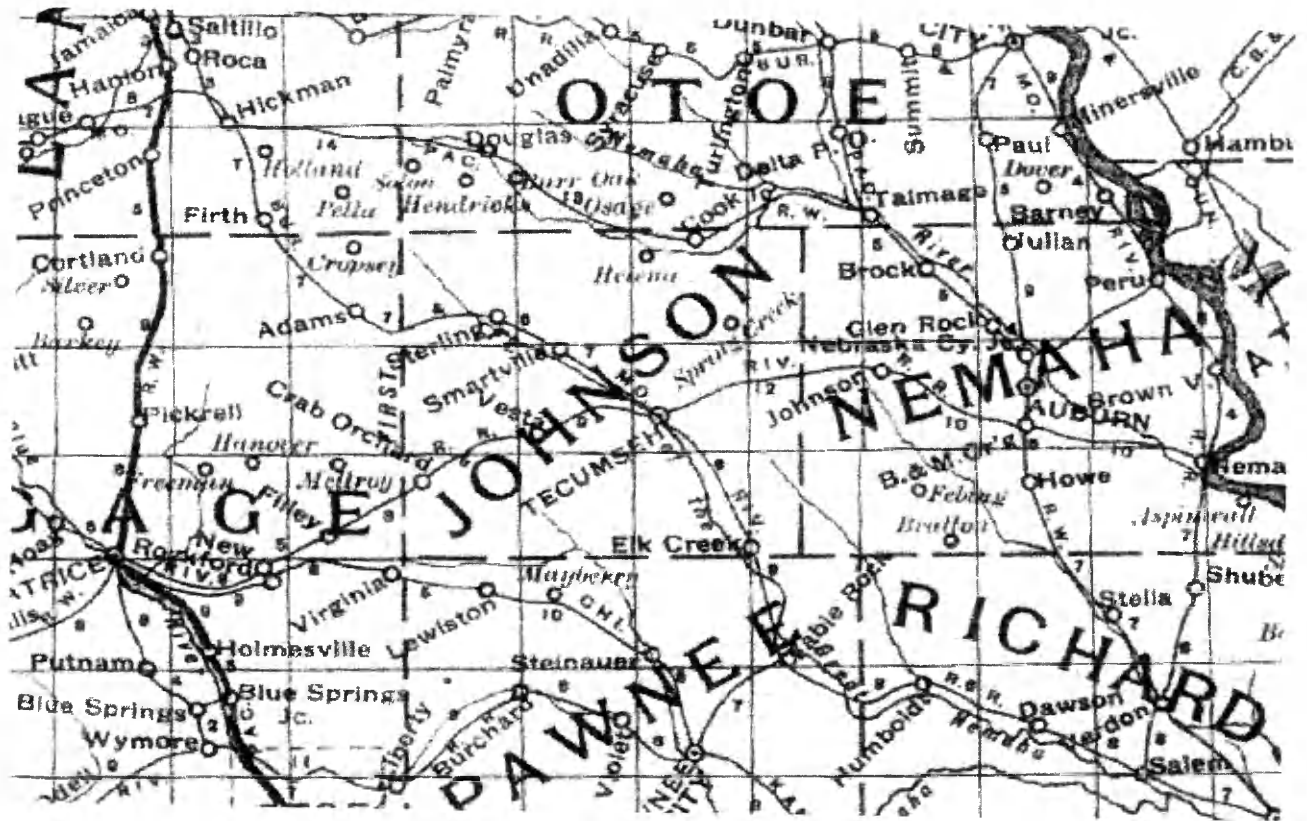
Railroad construction played a significant role in the expansion of Johnson County communities during this era. The Republican Valley Railroad completed a line between the town of Nemaha in Richardson County and Tecumseh in 1882, which was extended west to Beatrice the following year [Map 4.1]. The western addition of the line ran through Vesta, the community where the Strong family settled, and Crab Orchard. The last of the railroad lines laid across Johnson County was the Missouri Pacific line running through the northwest section of the county in 1887-88 [Map 4.1]. The routing of track through Johnson County brought the establishment of new communities as well as providing a stimulus for growth among some existing settlements. For those ephemeral villages bypassed by railroad development, however, track placement certified disaster.²⁰

The Johnson County communities of Crab Orchard, Sterling, St. Mary and Graf benefited from the coming of the railroads. Crab Orchard had been located along the old Brownville-Beatrice trail in 1857 and served stagecoach traffic on the trail after 1864. The community, however, was officially established only after the extension of the Missouri Pacific line in 1883. Sterling was not located on a prominent freighting trail, although residents secured a post office in the 1860s. A town plat was drawn after the coming of the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad in 1872 and commercial buildings were

constructed by the end of the decade. St. Mary and Graf, on the other hand, were products solely of the extension of railroads to the region. St. Mary was platted in 1879 along the tracks of the Atchison and Nebraska, which had been completed seven years earlier. Originally known as Smartville, the town's first commercial buildings were not constructed until the 1880s. Late in the century, residents attempted to change the town's name. Their first choice, Helena, was already in use by a town along the Atchison and Nebraska line and so the railroad refused to change the name. In 1908, community members successfully petitioned to change the town's postal identification to St. Mary, but the railroad continued to deny their requests. It remained unchanged until 1952 when the railroad company finally capitulated and the Smartville station was renamed St. Mary.²¹ In 1881, L.A. Graff purchased land near Johnson County's eastern border. The following year he granted the Republican Valley Railroad a right of way across his land. A town site was platted along this route in 1890. Named in honor of Graff, the community grew slowly in the years that followed.²²

While Crab Orchard and other towns benefited from the building of the railroads, a few settlements were lost in their wake. Bulter's sawmill named after an early settler (J.H. Butler) reportedly killed by Indians, in turn lent its name to a small settlement that grew up around the mill on the Big Nemaha River.²³ The sawmill, opened in 1863, expanded its operation later in the decade. When the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad made surveys for a route along the Big Nemaha, it wanted to build a station at Butler. Unfortunately, it was not able to come to terms with local landowners, and the

community was bypassed in 1872. In 1873 Elk Creek was platted only a mile away and, while that town is still found on maps of Johnson County, Butler no longer exists.²⁴



[Map 4.1] Railway Map of Nebraska, issued by the State Board of Transportation 1889 (Wahoo, Nebraska 1889). Library of Congress.

“Bob Town,” never more than a solitary store housing the Spring Creek post office in northeastern Johnson County, remained a community meeting point for the collection of mail and gossip.²⁵ In 1887 Will Cook granted a right-of-way across his land to the Missouri Pacific Railroad. The railroad surveyed its route and Cook, with the aid of a group of surveyors, platted a town along the prospective line. This new settlement, with its superior access to the railroad, lay within two miles of “Bob Town.” In 1888 the Spring Creek post office, after twenty years at “Bob Town,” was moved to the new town, now named Cook. With the removal of mail service, the store run by Norm Yarwood was forced to close and relocate. Today “Bob Town” lives only in Johnson County history and in prose written by former residents of the region.

Helena, another of Johnson County’s early communities, was established during the late 1850s. It began to grow following the construction of a bridge across the Big Nemaha in 1860. In 1867, the future of the town must have appeared quite promising, for G. P. Tucker and B. F. Lushbaugh established a town plat for the village. Then, in 1871-72, the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad bypassed the town, and the community was completely deserted within two years.²⁶

While Tecumseh and Vesta were the only officially organized towns established prior to the introduction of railroad service to the county, several smaller settlements subsequently developed. Each of them was significantly affected by the construction of railroads. Between 1880 and 1900 the county was transformed from a scattering of small settlements, whose location was determined largely by the ability of community members to secure a post office, to an area of established towns providing an ever expanding

variety of commercial and professional services. New town plats expanded the invisible grids defining the landscape, while buildings pushed up from the surface of the prairie creating a new image for the territory. Within Tecumseh those changes had already taken place. In this new era, it was a drive for permanence and prosperity that began to transform Tecumseh's downtown. The need for community adaptation was grounded in terms of necessity as well as vanity.

A.T. Andreas's *History of the State of Nebraska* reports that the business block located southwest of Tecumseh's town square was destroyed by fire in the fall of 1875.²⁷ Johnson County's centennial history committee, however, wrote in its 1956 volume that it was the buildings on the north side of the square that were burned.²⁸ Yet available additions of the local papers, unfortunately, provide no verification of a fire anywhere in town during 1874 or 1875. Despite the lack of supportive documentation for a major fire, Tecumseh residents demonstrated great concern over the threat of a destructive blaze. On 4 October 1873, the *Tecumseh Chieftain* warned: "Tecumseh is ill prepared for a conflagration."²⁹ Despite the town's purchase of a "chemical fire engine," local apprehension about fires played a role in persuading voters that the 1868 frame courthouse should be replaced.³⁰ In 1888, a new building was constructed. Even after the dedication ceremonies for the new courthouse had taken place, however, the *Johnson County Journal* (also published in Tecumseh) warned local citizens about the danger of fire: "More lives have been lost and more property destroyed by fire and flood within the last few months than was ever known before in the same length of time in the history of this country."³¹

The city's politicians addressed the question of fire safety as well. Ordinances passed in 1888 set fire safety districts, construction guidelines and repair requirements for buildings around Tecumseh's courthouse square. These new regulations prohibited the construction of additional wooden structures within the commercial district. Only non-combustible resources such as brick or stone and fireproof roofing materials could be used in new construction. The removal of awnings or porches that might act as fuel for a fire also was made obligatory. Existing wooden frame buildings damaged by fire or other causes that resulted in a depreciation of more than 50 percent were to be replaced with structures that met city codes. While these measures were passed in the interest of fire safety, they also had the effect of encouraging a shift from wooden false front architecture to more modern and permanent forms of building.³²

Community boosterism, which played a part in advancing the settlement of the plains, also contributed to changing Tecumseh's built landscape. Emigrants to the Great Plains were promised, in the words of Charles Dana Wilber, that "rain follows the plow" and that prosperity might be attained by anyone willing to take a chance.³³ Some of the most vibrant commentaries promoting Nebraska settlement were produced near the end of the nineteenth century. At a celebration of Nebraska's silver anniversary, in late May 1892, Judge Norris of Ponca, Nebraska, addressed the following comments to the celebration's participants:

The western plains are equally fertile with the eastern valleys, but owing to the want of moisture have not yet produced equally valuable harvests. There is doubtless considerable truth in the old geography that located Nebraska as part of the great American desert. Early in the century buffalo grass extended almost to the western bank of the Missouri. Today Buffalo grass is not found within two

hundred or three hundred miles of the Missouri River. As you know this grass grows upon sterile land where there is a lack of moisture. It is undoubtedly a fact that the rain line, or the line of moisture, moves westward with advancing Civilization.³⁴

The *Tecumseh Chieftain* espoused the virtues of Johnson County in similarly noble tones.

In 1888, it made an appeal to prospective settlers declaring all that was virtuous and desirable could be found in Johnson County:

Emigrants from the east, who are about to try Nebraska, will find no better place to cast anchor than Johnson County. Confessedly one of the very best in the state, a thrifty, educated people, cheap lands, good schools, timber, plenty of water, a climate which carries healing in its breezes and health in its calms, a school house on every hill top, live, wide awake and growing towns, water power on a dozen streams, the best roads in the world, and good markets, renders it desirable in all respects with the additional fact that land steadily and surely increases in value, and to invest in land here is to insure a safe and growing property.³⁵

The paper also urged local residents of the County to “organize for the coming boom.”³⁶

Its rival, the *Johnson County Journal*, printed lists of improved properties along with financial statistics in celebratory and promotional tones. In this way, both papers reflected community boosterism and the results of Tecumseh’s growth. In June 1889, *The Journal* reported aggregate expenditures of \$112,000 on property development in Tecumseh during the previous year. This total included the new Johnson County courthouse. The Hopkins Hotel was among the twenty-eight properties discussed in this account.³⁷

A large percentage of Tecumseh’s downtown buildings were constructed at the end of the nineteenth century. Whether born out of a necessity to secure the community’s assets against fire or out of a will to believe in a glorious future, new and more permanent

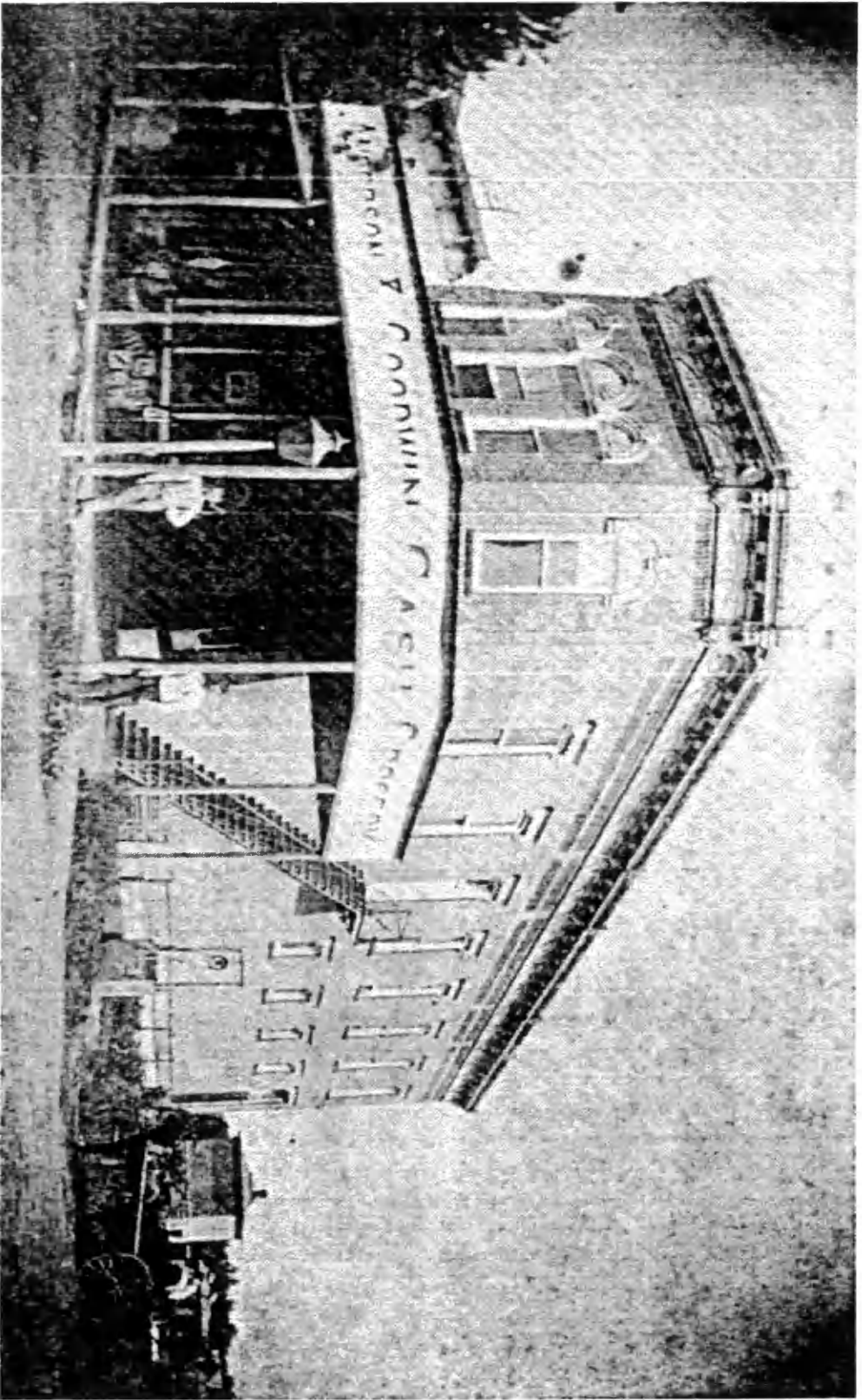
buildings were erected throughout this period. In 1979, a building survey by the Nebraska State Historical Society found that 72 percent of the town's late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings were still standing. Fifty-four percent of these structures dated to the nineteenth century.³⁸ In the twenty years since this survey, a few buildings, such as the Hopkins Hotel, have been lost, but the overall percentage of extant buildings of that period remains high.

Among the structures surviving from this era is the 1880 W. R. Spicknell and W. H. Hassett Building. A two-part commercial block on Tecumseh's south Third Street, it is a two-story brick mercantile building which stands facing the courthouse square. The lower portions of the building, which were at one time divided, originally housed a barbershop and restaurant. The upper half of the building, which remained undivided, was developed into an opera house. Today, visitors can buy a recent addition of the *Tecumseh Chieftain* in the Rexall Drug Store that has replaced both the barbershop and restaurant. The second floor opera house, once the site of temperance lectures, community dances and visiting shows, now stands empty and deteriorating, its curtain shrouding a silent stage. Other examples of Tecumseh's surviving nineteenth century landscape are the Chittenden, Ellesworth, and IOOF Buildings. Chittenden's Store, a two-story brick and iron structure, was built in the late 1880s within the same business block as Tecumseh's opera house, while the Ellesworth Building, on the northwest corner of Fourth and Broadway, was built in 1885. The Ellesworth, adorned with stamped metal ornamentation originally housed the Anderson and Goodwin Cash Grocery [Photo 4.4]. One of the last additions to this evolving townscape during the nineteenth century was the

IIOF's new meeting hall. In 1899 the community's fraternal order of Odd Fellows oversaw the construction of a two-story brick building on the corner of Third and Broadway. Its dedication to that brotherhood can still be read in the nameplate centered in the building's brick façade.³⁹

A comparison of photographs taken after 1880 with those taken in the early twentieth century reveals significant alterations to the community's built landscape. Pictorial documentation for views north and west of the town square provide the most complete record. The northeast corner of Tecumseh's center square (Blocks 16 and 17) began construction under the ownership of Milo Cody. Four buildings and a line of fencing appear to have been the extent of Cody's development up to 1868 [Photo 4.5a]. During the community's second phase of development, a more coherent, yet still frontier styled business district grew within this section [Photo 4.5b]. The town's final evolutionary phase saw these same rough wood frame buildings replaced by more substantial building forms [Photo 4.5c]. On the northwest corner of this block, construction of the IIOF's meeting hall helped to define the block as a commercial unit [Photo 4.6a; 4.6b]. Similar changes in architectural style, materials, and patterns can be seen in photographs of Block 37 on the west side of Tecumseh's town square [Photos 4.7a; 4.7b; 4.7c]. Brick and stone construction became so much a part of the building style of Tecumseh, that the lumberyards at times apparently failed to keep supplies in stock. On 27 June 1889, readers of the *Tecumseh Chieftain* found the following item:

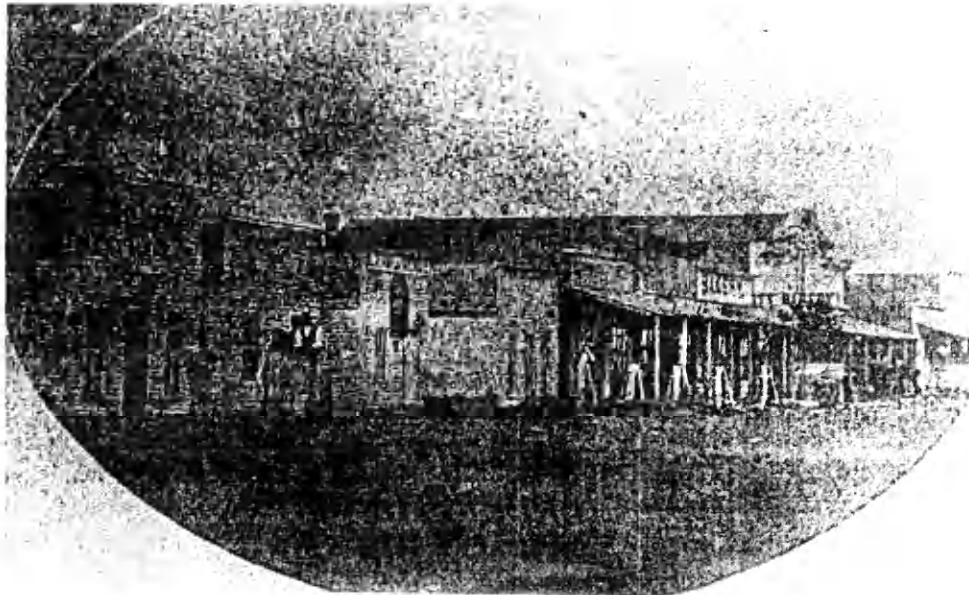
Jas. Denlen built an addition to his barn last week the lumber for which he hauled from Sterling owing to the fact that our yard did not have the material. Is it not time for our millionaire monopolists to awaken from their protracted slumbers and try to keep on hand at least enough lumber to build a wagon shed?⁴⁰



[Photo 4.4] Tecumseh, Anderson and Goodwin Cash Grocery – circa 1889.



[Photo 4.5a] Tecumseh, View northeast, Brownville Road in foreground - circa 1868.



[Photo 4.5b] Tecumseh, North Side of the town square – circa 1874.



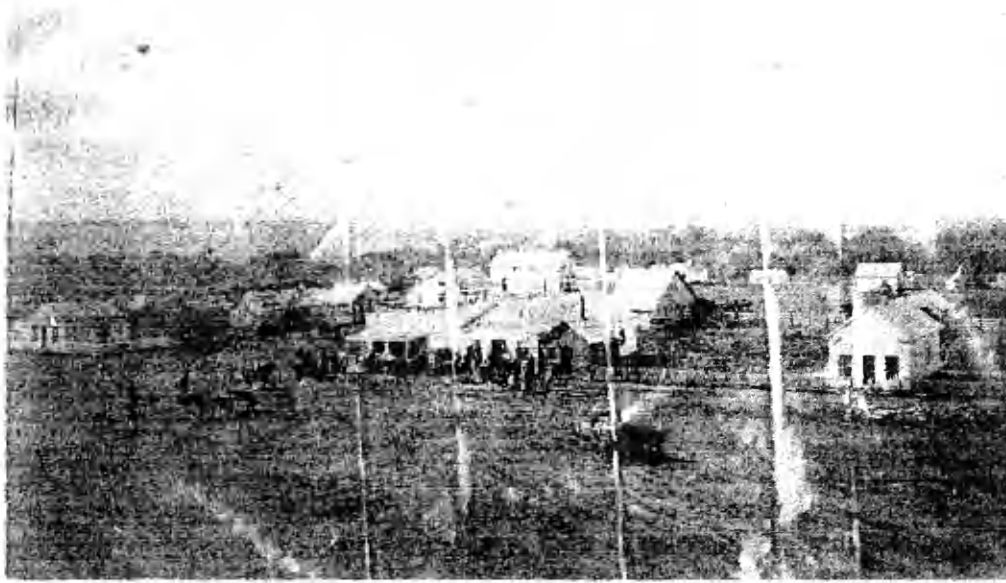
[Photo 4.5c] Tecumseh, Northeast corner of town square circa 1889.



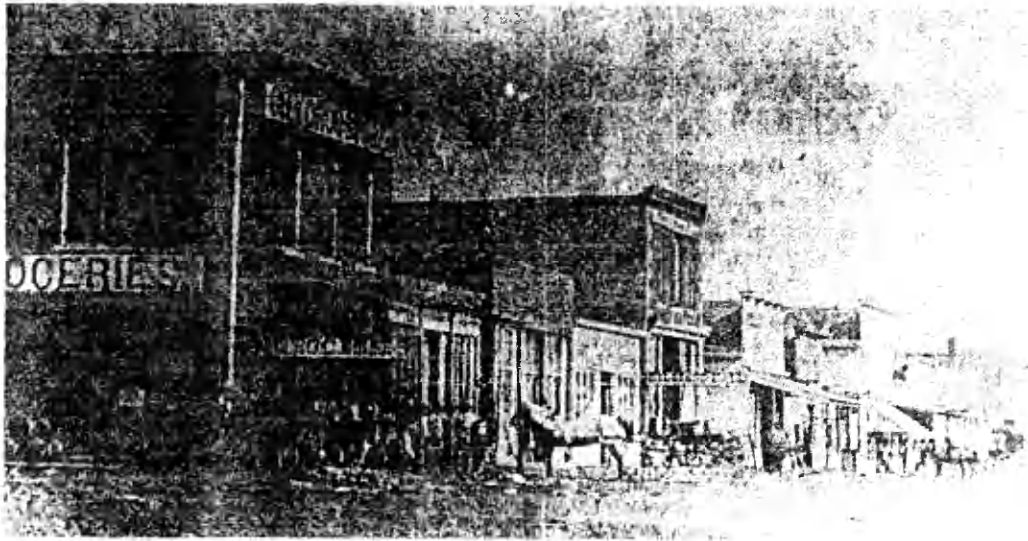
[Photo 4.6a] Tecumseh, North Side of town square – circa 1900.



[Photo 4.6b] Tecumseh, Northwest corner of town square -- circa 1889.



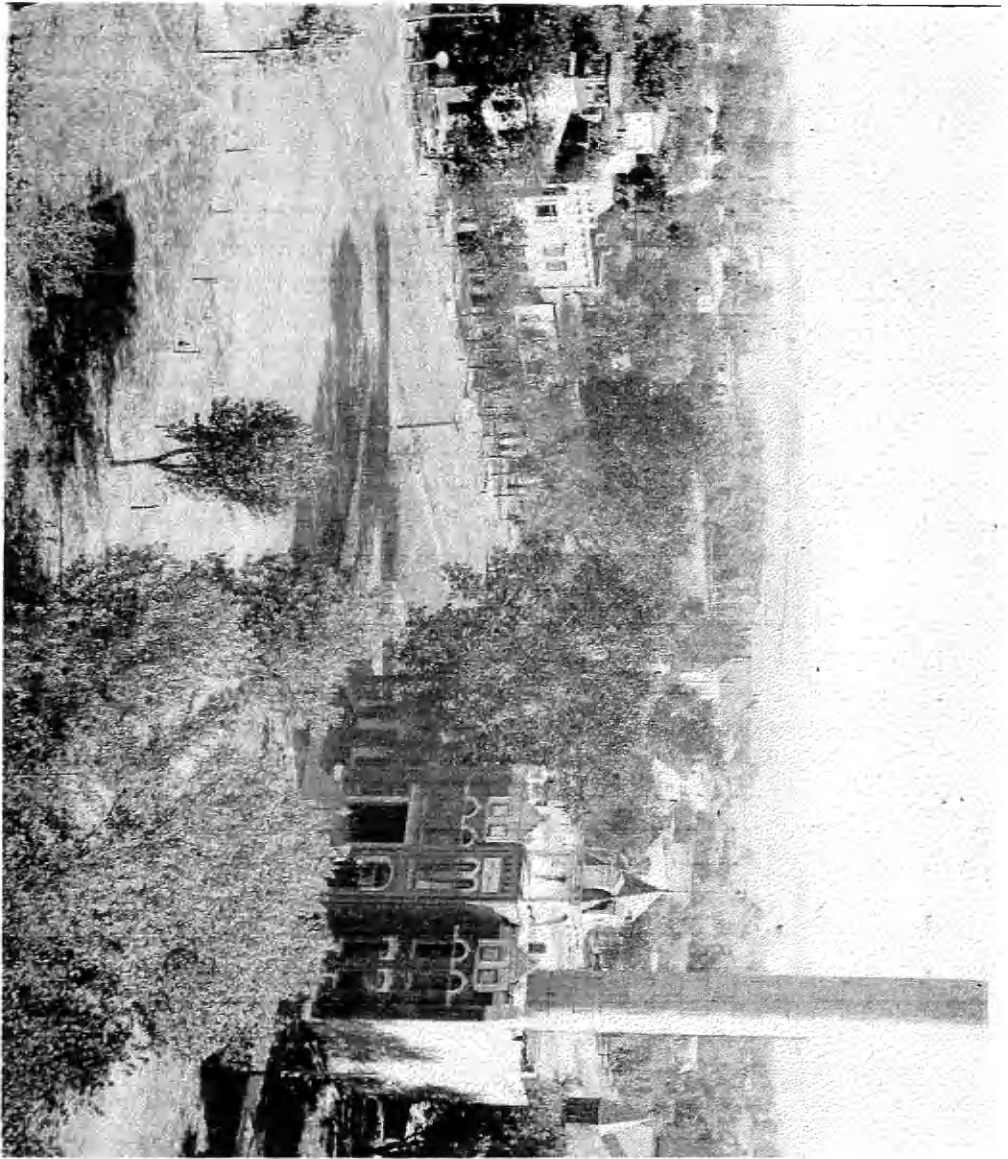
[Photo 4.7a] Tecumseh, West Side, split panoramic view - circa 1868.



[Photo 4.7b] Tecumseh, West Side of the town square - circa 1873.



[Photo 4.7c] Tecumseh, Southwest corner of town square - circa 1900.



[Photo 4.8] Tecumseh City Hall (northeast corner of the square) – circa 1900.

The entire set of photographs may reveal other changes within the town between 1880 and 1900. During this time, in addition to establishing fire districts and building regulations, Tecumseh's town council instituted several ordinances designed to improve the town environment. In 1888 the council resolved that it was the duty of all persons owning lots adjacent to streets within Tecumseh's city limits to plant trees along these thoroughfares. Each tree was to be set twelve feet back from the road and twelve feet apart from one another. It was allowable for property owners to plant shade, ornamental or fruit trees, in compliance with this ordinance. The council established fines to punish the neglect or cutting of these trees, and others were planted around the margins of the courthouse square. Business districts were exempt from the demands of this ordinance, yet photographs of Tecumseh's downtown still reveal what appear to be increases in planted foliage.⁴¹ The effect of the measure can be read in these words, printed in the *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 June 1889: "Tecumseh is fairly entitled to the name 'Forest City.' We think it has more and better shade trees than any town of any where near its size in the State."⁴²

Further regulatory measures were passed in 1888 to prohibit vagrancy and prostitution, to control saloon hours and stray dogs and to set standards and liabilities for city plumbing.⁴³ Ordinances regarding vagrancy, saloons, prostitution and stray dogs set restraints upon the community's social rather than physical landscape and are not recognizable alterations within the town's photographic record. Such measures, however, can be seen as one of the many tools used to shape Tecumseh's changing environment as were the developments of utilities and public services. The construction

of an electrification plant and city water works in 1888, a poultry-processing plant in 1890, and the beginning of Rural Free Delivery in 1892 completed a series of community improvements within the county.⁴⁴ Cooperative projects such as these were part of the general spirit of urban development, which took hold of towns throughout the state during the 1880s.⁴⁵ These changes not only altered the quality of life for Johnson County residents, but added to the transformation of the built environment as well. Photographs of Tecumseh's city hall [Photo 4.8] show the standpipe that was constructed as part of the community's water works in 1888. This large brick structure towered above Tecumseh's trees and buildings. Because the City Hall also functioned as the town's fire department headquarters, a large set of doors was originally constructed in the front of the building. This same photograph reveals the electric poles and wires that also became part of the town's landscape with the advent of electrification.

Fire insurance maps drawn by the Sanborn Map and Publishing Company provide a final view of the evolution of the community between 1885 and 1909 [Map sets 4.2; 4.3; 4.4]. Their portrayal of Tecumseh's public square and the business blocks surrounding it reveal part of the sequence of changes wrought by the passing years. In 1885 the drawings show the outline of the old courthouse in the center of the square with two smaller structures set to the east. Two wells, one to the west and one to the east, bordered the square at this time. By 1900, Tecumseh's new courthouse had replaced the old one and a heating plant had been added to the eastern edge of the grounds. A bandstand is shown gracing the western lawns. Little apparently changed before new sets of drawings were made in 1909; only the notations of the courthouse's electric light

system appears to be new. The buildings, within Block 36, exhibit the transient variety of businesses housed inside their walls. For one structure, the photography shop occupying the storefront in 1885 became a grocery and notions' shop by 1900, and stood vacant in 1909.⁴⁶

Like Block 36, Block 16 developed in the years between each set of drawings. In the first group of illustrations a number of small buildings and vacant spaces are visible. In later drawings these buildings and spaces have been replaced by larger structures, lined wall to wall along the courthouse side of the block. The W. H. Hasset Lumberyard in the northwest quarter of the block remained a fixture in each new drawing but ownership of the yard apparently changed hands between 1900 and 1909 [Photo 4.3].⁴⁷ The Sanborn maps, while valuable sources of information, do not reveal all the changes that occurred between 1885 and 1909. For example, the county jail constructed in the northeast quarter of Block 16, is drawn essentially the same on each of the Sanborn maps. Built in 1872-73 with funds raised through the issuance of county bonds, the structure was improved in 1899 with the digging of a well to supply the facility's water needs.⁴⁸ Near the turn of the century, the "bull pen," an iron, cage-like structure across the front of the building was added, altering the jail's appearance. Neither of these additions is included in the Sanborn drawings.⁴⁹

"Tecumseh, as it stands to-day, is indeed an attractive town. Situated on high, rolling ground, on the east bank of the Nemaha, the ample stores and neat, cheerful dwellings of its 2,000 inhabitants are visible from a long distance in the county on either side."⁵⁰ A. T. Andreas's 1883 description of Tecumseh would not necessarily have fit the

community in its earlier phases of development. Between 1869 and 1874, the community was transformed, from a scattering of log and gable-roofed, frame structures adhering to a combined residential and commercial format into a town with a defined commercial district and architecture style. This was Tecumseh's era of false-front planed wood construction, spurred on by the end of the Civil War, the implementation of the Homestead Act and the completion of the county's first railroad.

County expansion and community boosterism were to leave their mark on Tecumseh's third phase of development between 1880 and 1900. Andreas observes: "The air of enterprise everywhere manifest, gives the stranger a most agreeable impression."⁵¹ This quotation and similar ones must certainly have pleased the town's residents and promoters. During this time the community was again transformed. Perhaps a seemingly collective fear of fire led to city ordinances that established building codes and set fire districts. Whatever motivated the community to implement them, these measures promoted new construction, as did the optimistic rhetoric of newspapers and lecturers. Brick buildings replaced false-front wooden structures. New commercial blocks were built to house a changing variety of businesses, and new civic buildings were designed to highlight the status of the county seat. A pretentious county courthouse building and an ostentatious city hall were constructed. These two buildings face one another, each dominating its surroundings, separate yet complementary structures. The completion of such new commercial and civic buildings during Tecumseh's third era of growth set the tone for the community. Tecumseh, they seemed to say, was no longer a

frontier prairie town and rural county seat, but Johnson County's premier and governing city.

William and Julia Strong, who came to the region during its infancy, lived to see many of the changes wrought upon the landscape of Tecumseh and Johnson County. Noble Strong, who had been the first member of the family to reach Nebraska, left the county relatively early, but William and Julia stayed. They were members of the community when the first official courthouse was constructed in 1868. Their images may be among the shadowy figures photographed with the town at that time. William served as the county's superintendent of public instruction in 1858 and 1859, and later as a member of the Johnson County Board of Commissioners between 1880 and 1882.⁵² It was a tradition of service that would be carried on by William and Julia's oldest son, Charles. Only five years old when the family arrived in Johnson County, Charles came of age in 1869 and spent his young adulthood working the land with his father. He also tried his hand at freighting between 1872 and 1873 and then homesteading in northwest Kansas, but returned to Johnson County. In the end, Charles Strong would spend twenty years running blacksmith operations in Tecumseh and Sterling and would serve as county sheriff from 1898 to 1901.⁵³

On 15 January 1890, the family lost Julia Strong at the age of sixty-four. Born in Massachusetts, she had arrived in Johnson County at the age of thirty and over the next thirty-four years, she witnessed the transformation of the area from an unsettled frontier to a thriving community of small towns and farms. What her views of these changes might have been we do not know, but with just a few words Julia's world is brought to

life and the images they transmit to us can perhaps be used to understand the transformation of Johnson County. In the one 1857 letter we have written by her hand, Julia expressed the hope of seeing her sister-in-law come to Johnson County. She wrote of finally having another woman as a neighbor, of the endless hard work she faced on the homestead, and her wish to go no further west.⁵⁴ Julia made the trip to Nebraska from Iowa while pregnant, and the child, Jane Strong, would be the first white female born in the county. Later, Julia would be buried next to her son John who had died in 1866 at the age of sixteen.⁵⁵ The headstone which marks her final resting place is inscribed with the image of an open book and reads simply: "Julia A., Wife of W. H. Strong, Died Jan. 15, 1890 Aged 64 years. Separation is our lot, meeting our hope."⁵⁶ The religious overtone of those last words are clear; we are all bound to be separated by death and our hope of meeting once more lies in heaven. Given the history of Julia's life, however, one might also see those last words as a summary of her days on this earth. Julia Strong, her husband, and all the early settlers of Johnson County had to accept the isolation of frontier life, isolation from family, friends, and society. Acceptance may not have come with joy, but with resignation and the hope that as they carved out farms and communities from an unfamiliar landscape and transformed rough towns into solid urban centers, they would not only recreate a sense of home but would have built a more prosperous future for their children and grandchildren.

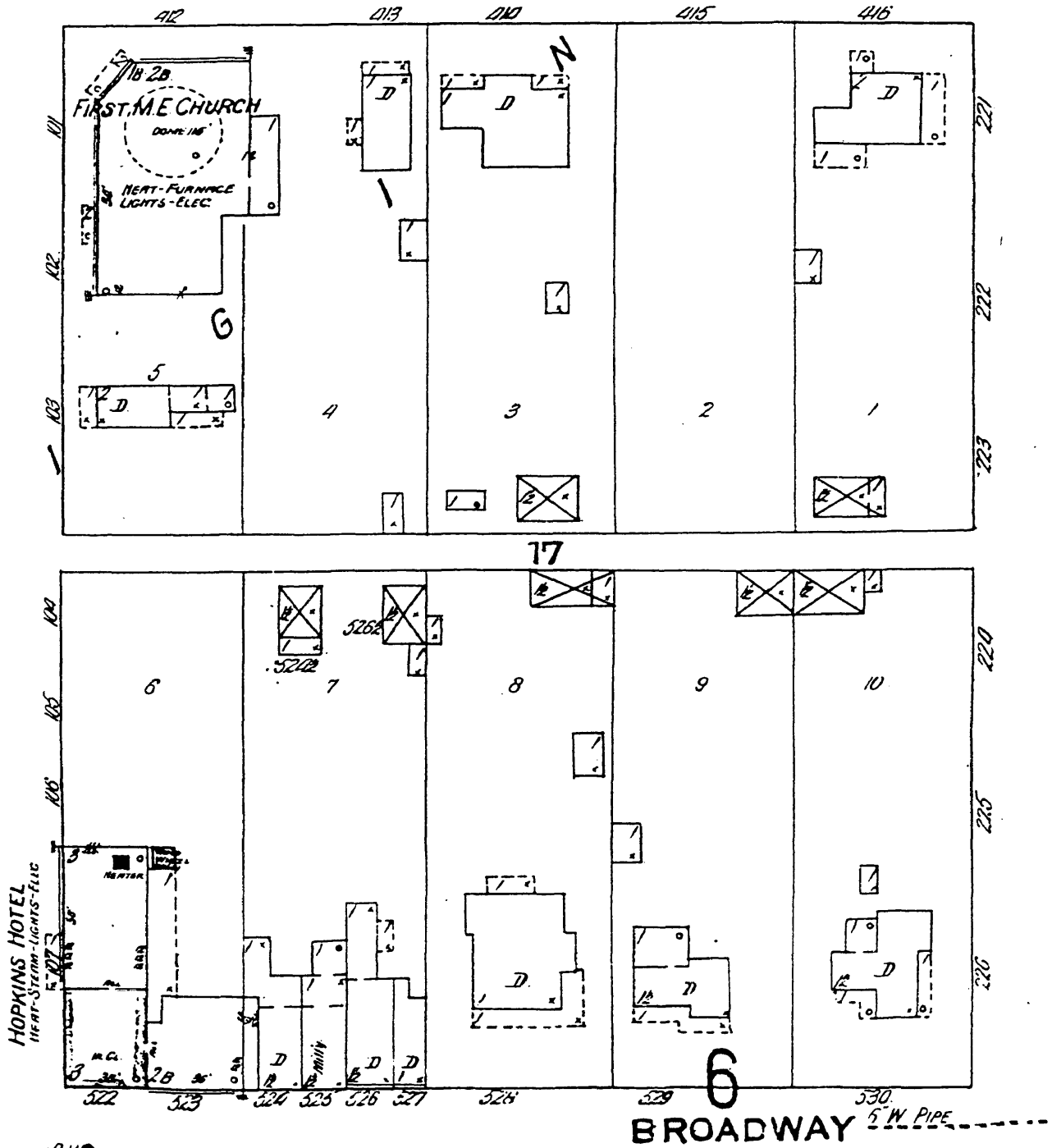
[Map Set 4.2] Sanborn Map & Publishing 1885. Insurance maps of Tecumseh, Nebraska.

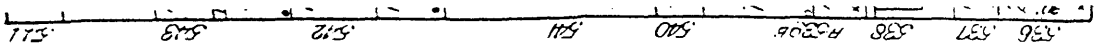
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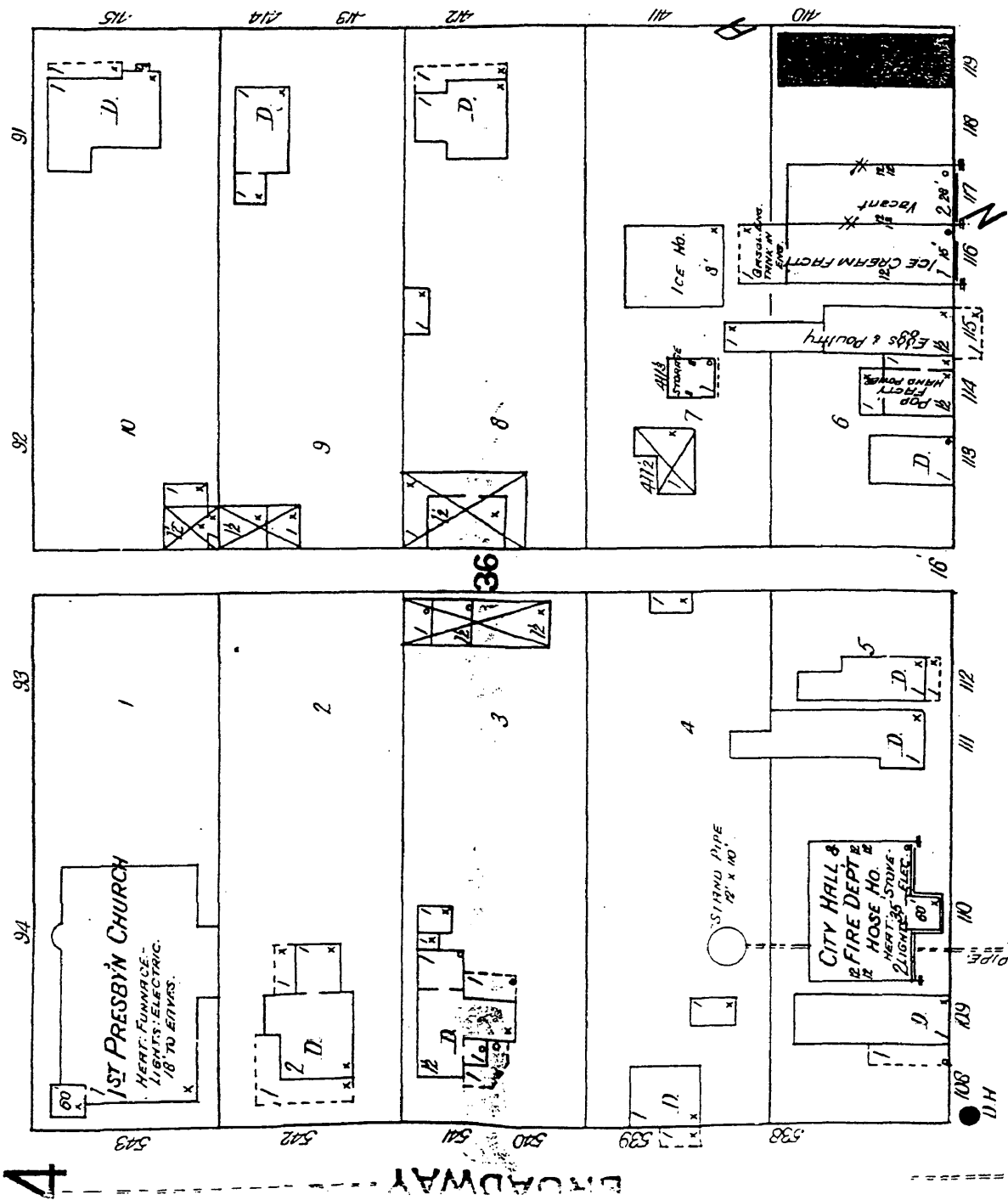
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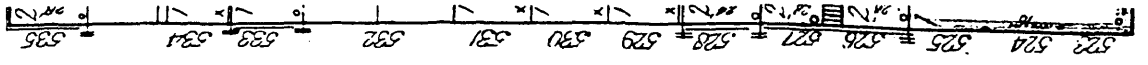
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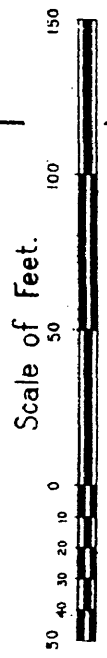


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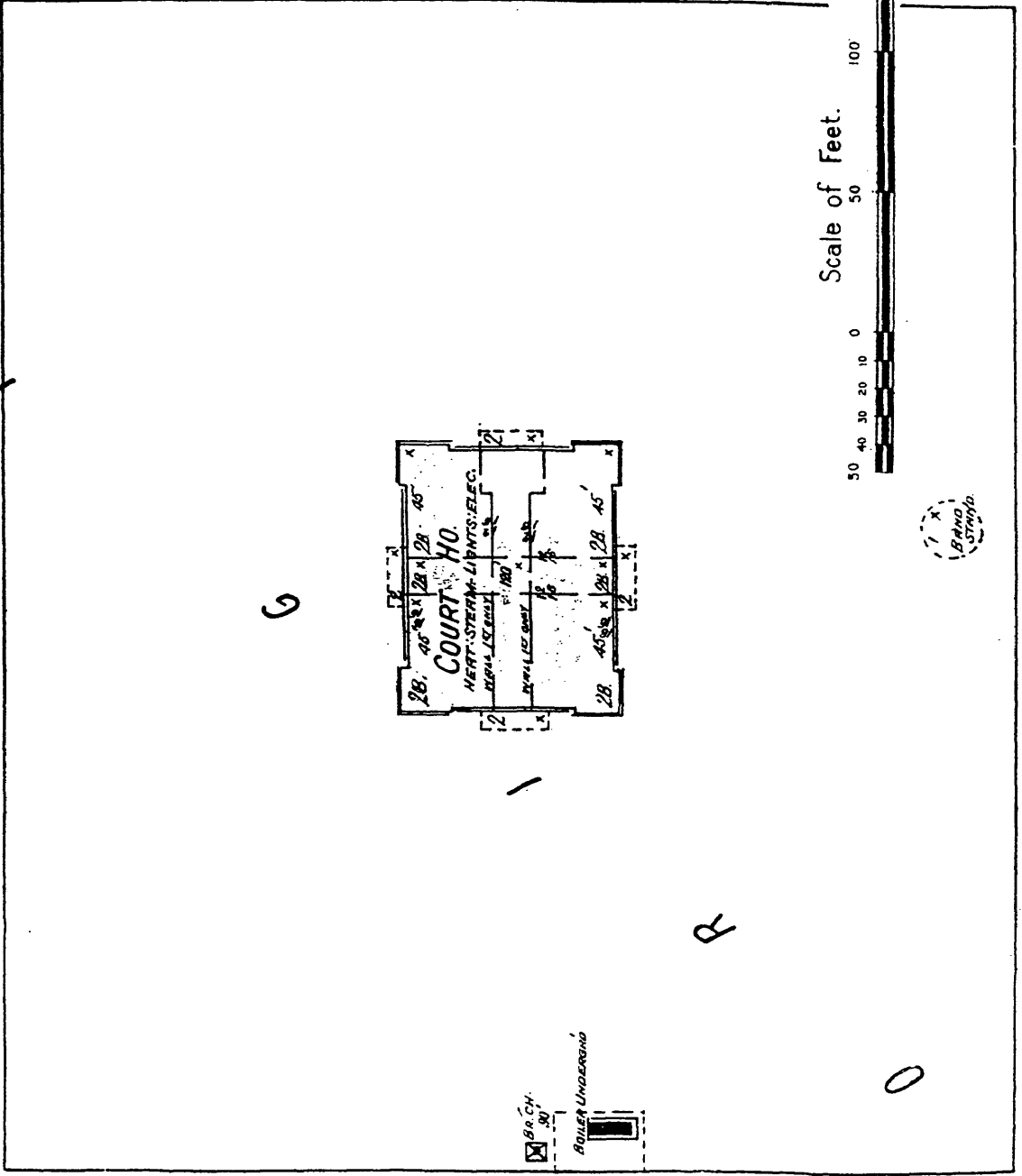
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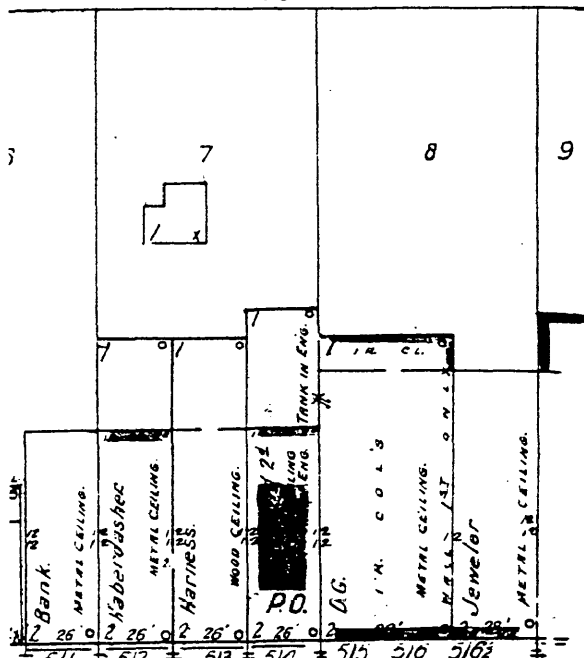
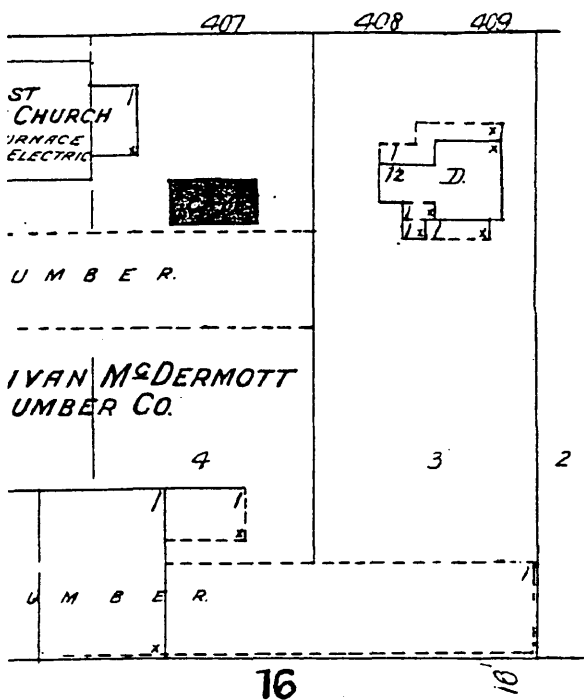
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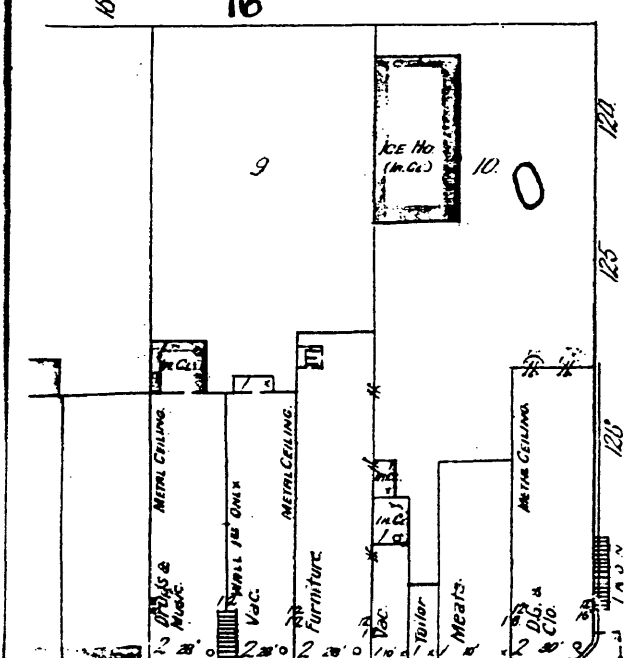
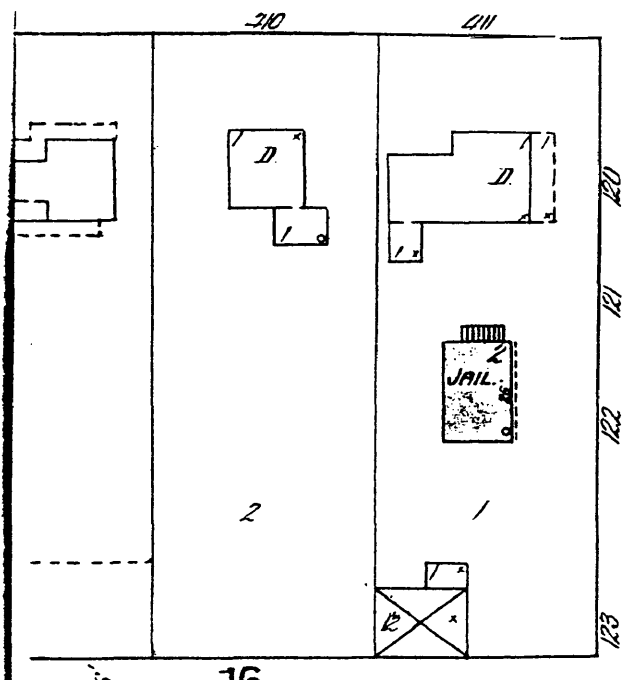
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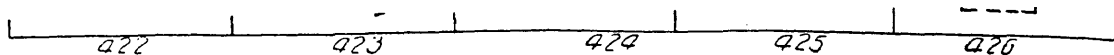
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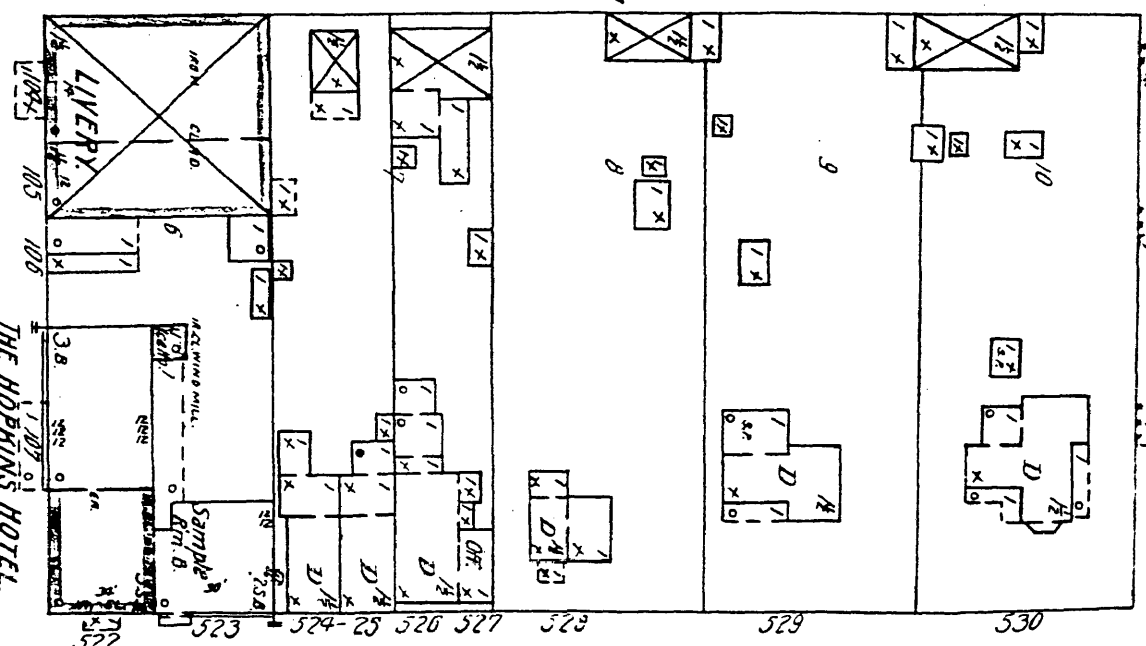
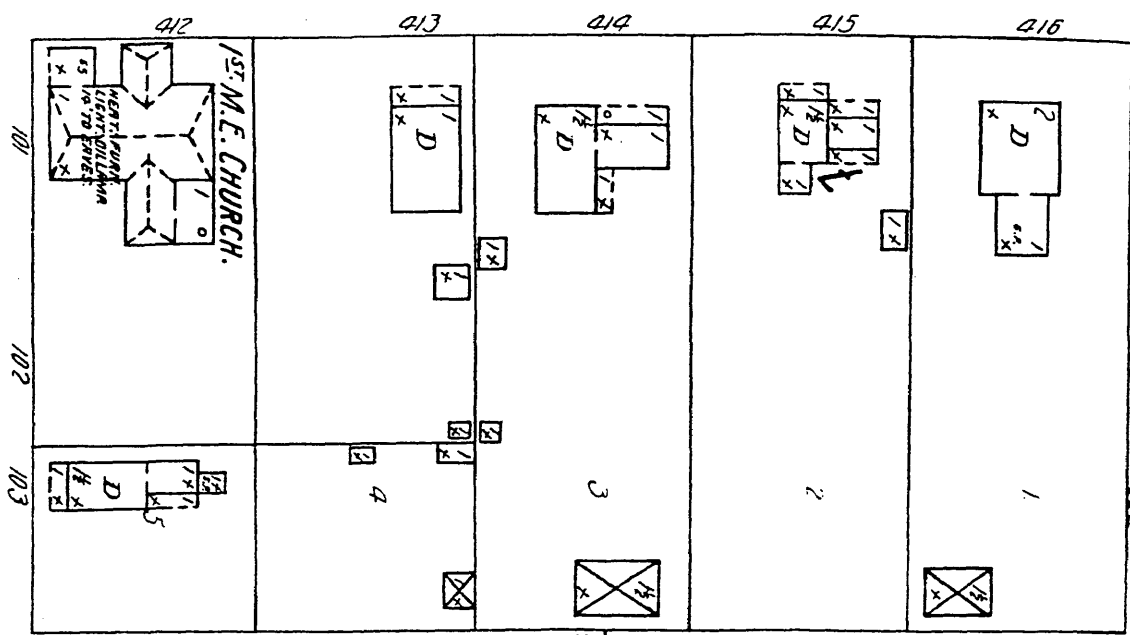
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[Map Set 4.3] Sanborn Map & Publishing 1900. Insurance maps of Tecumseh, Nebraska.



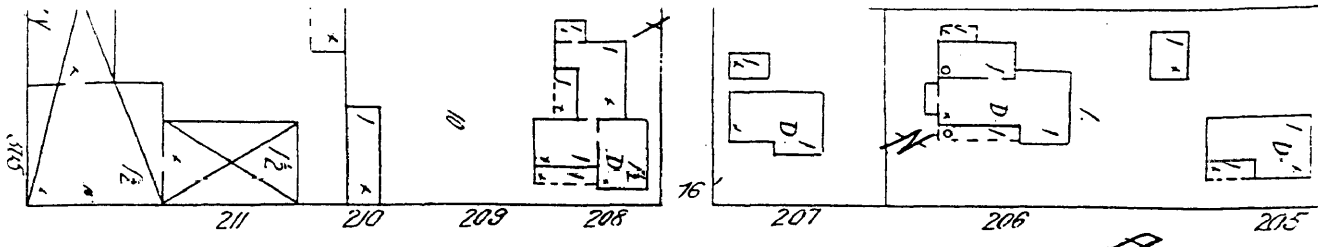
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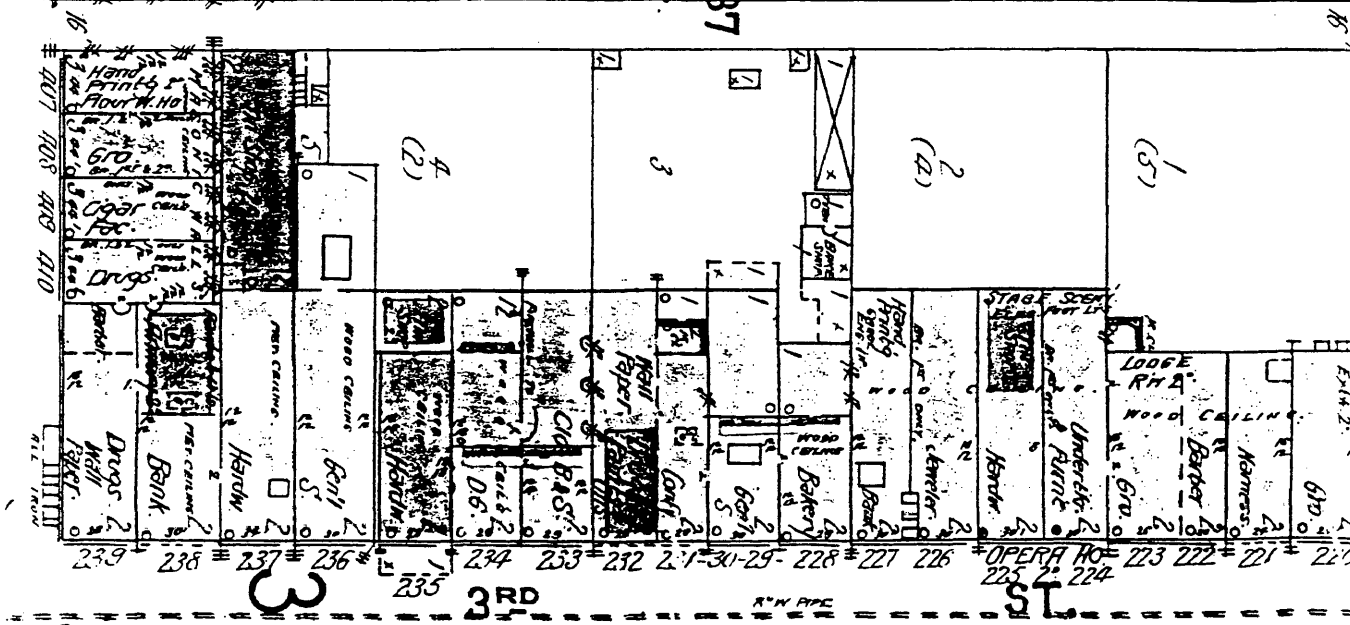
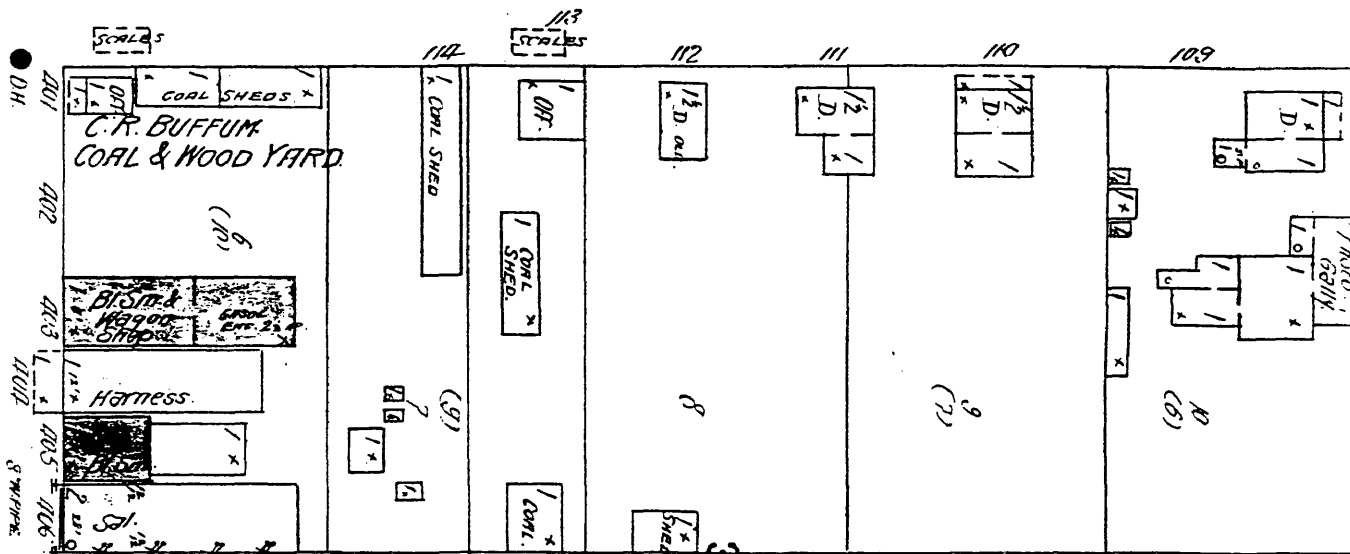
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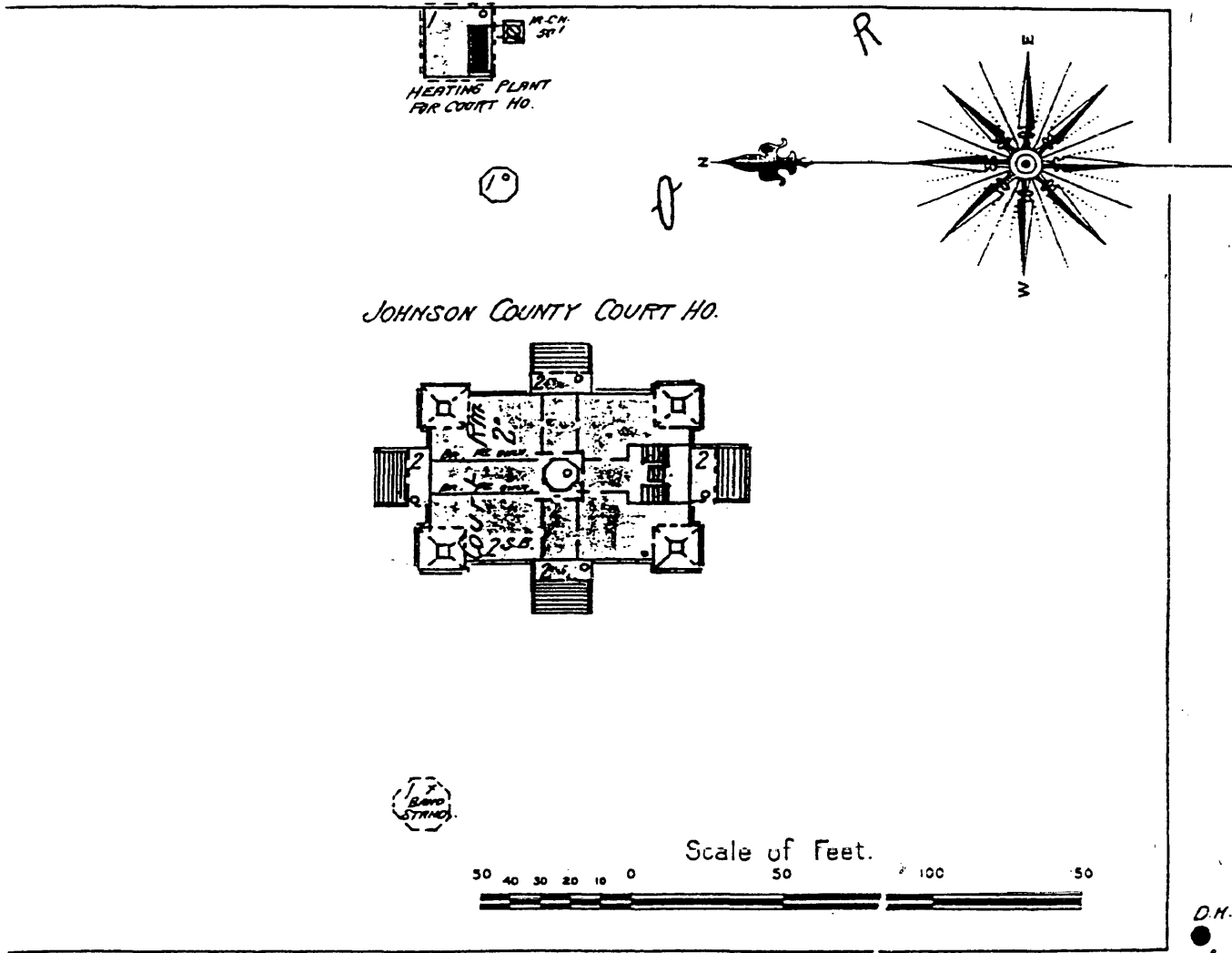
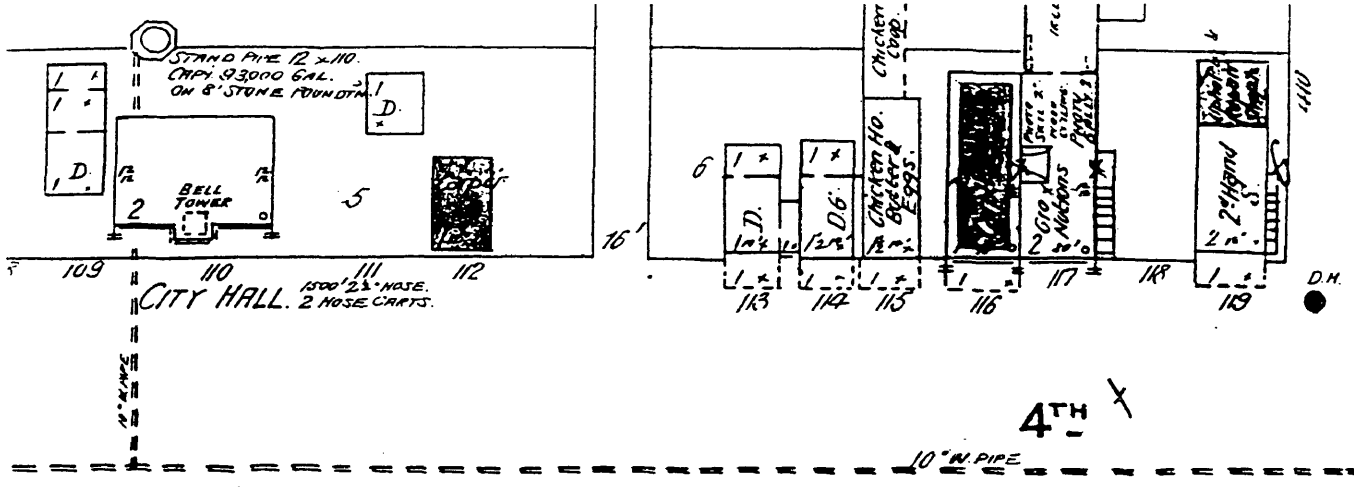
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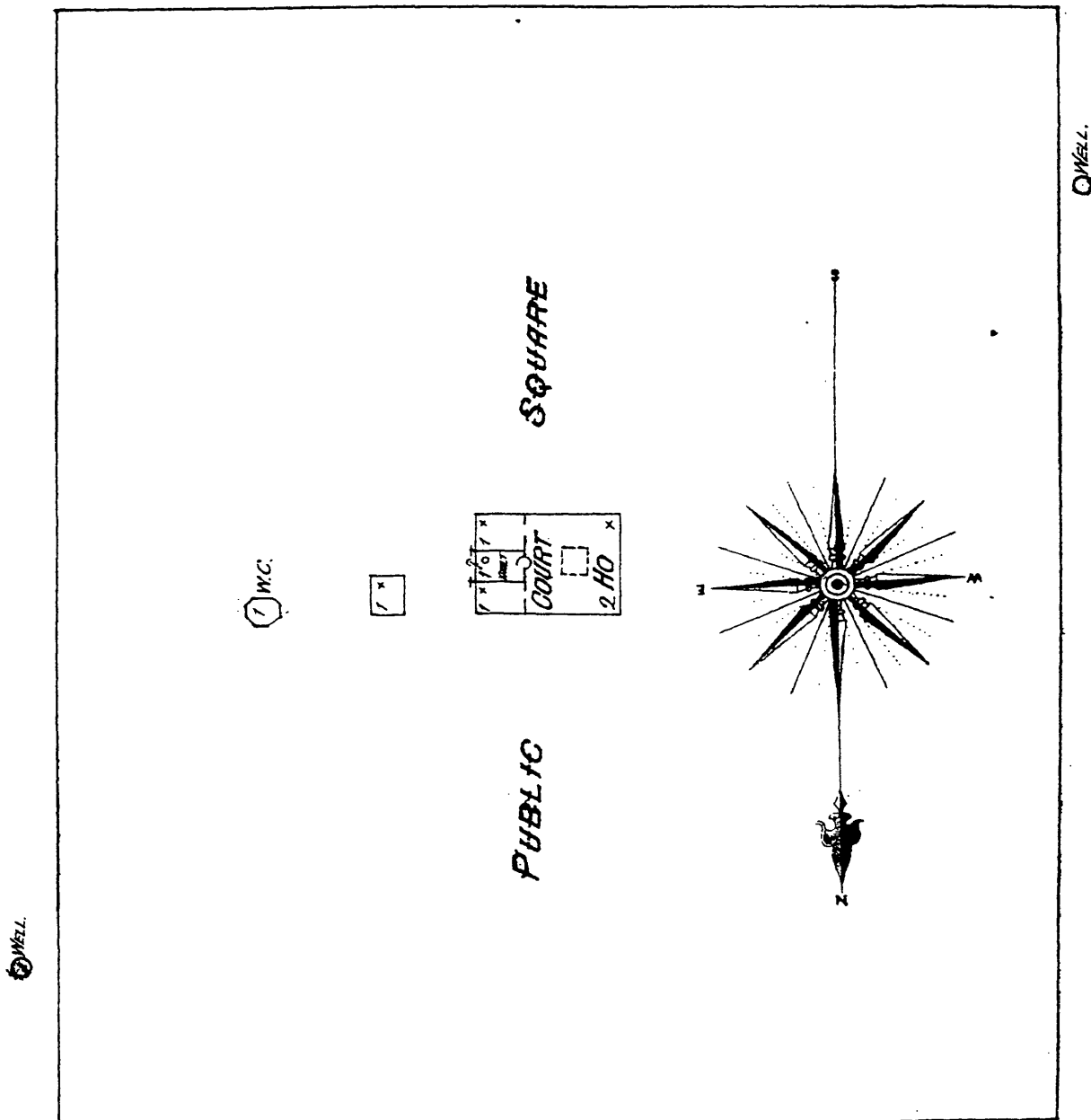
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[Map Set 4.4] Sanborn Map & Publishing 1909. Insurance maps of Tecumseh, Nebraska.

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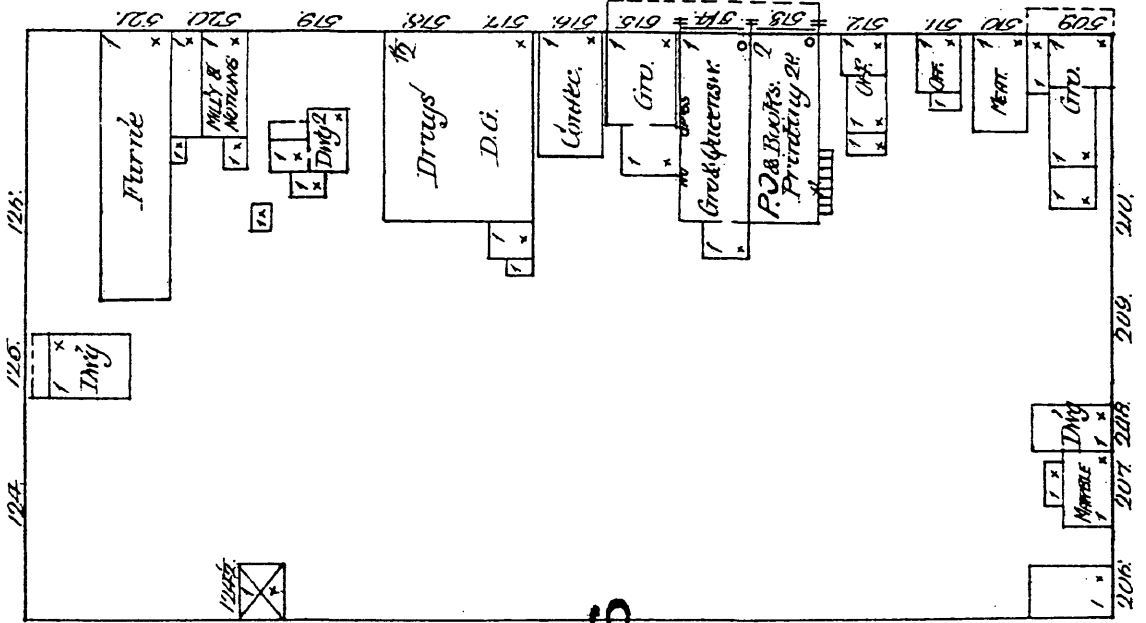
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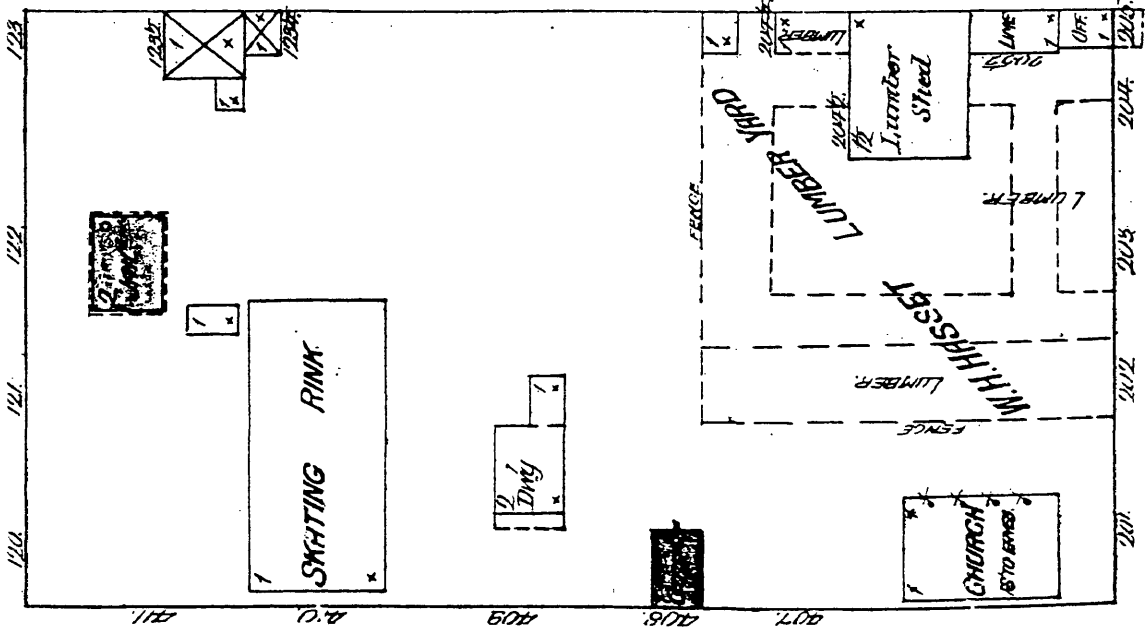


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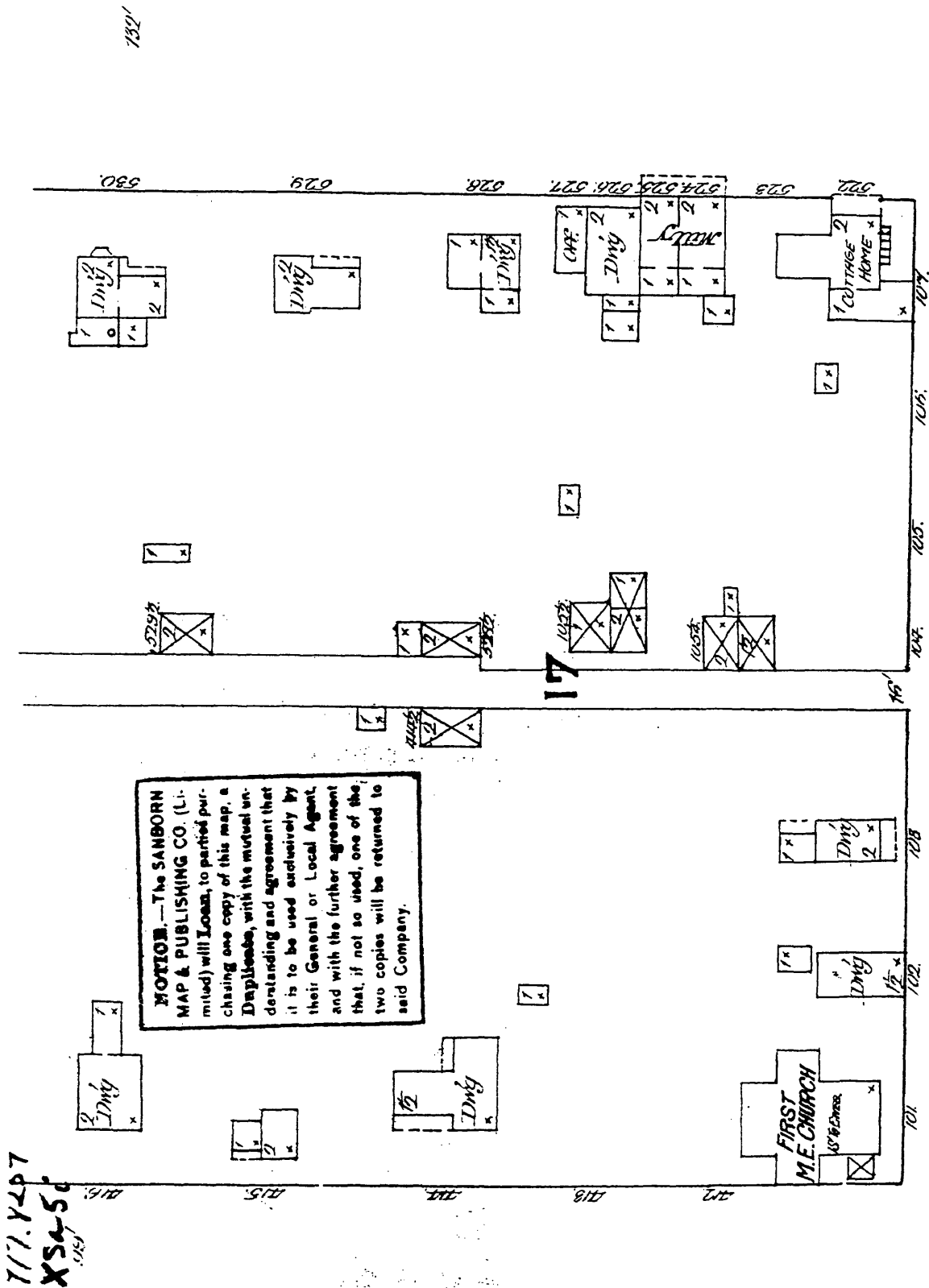
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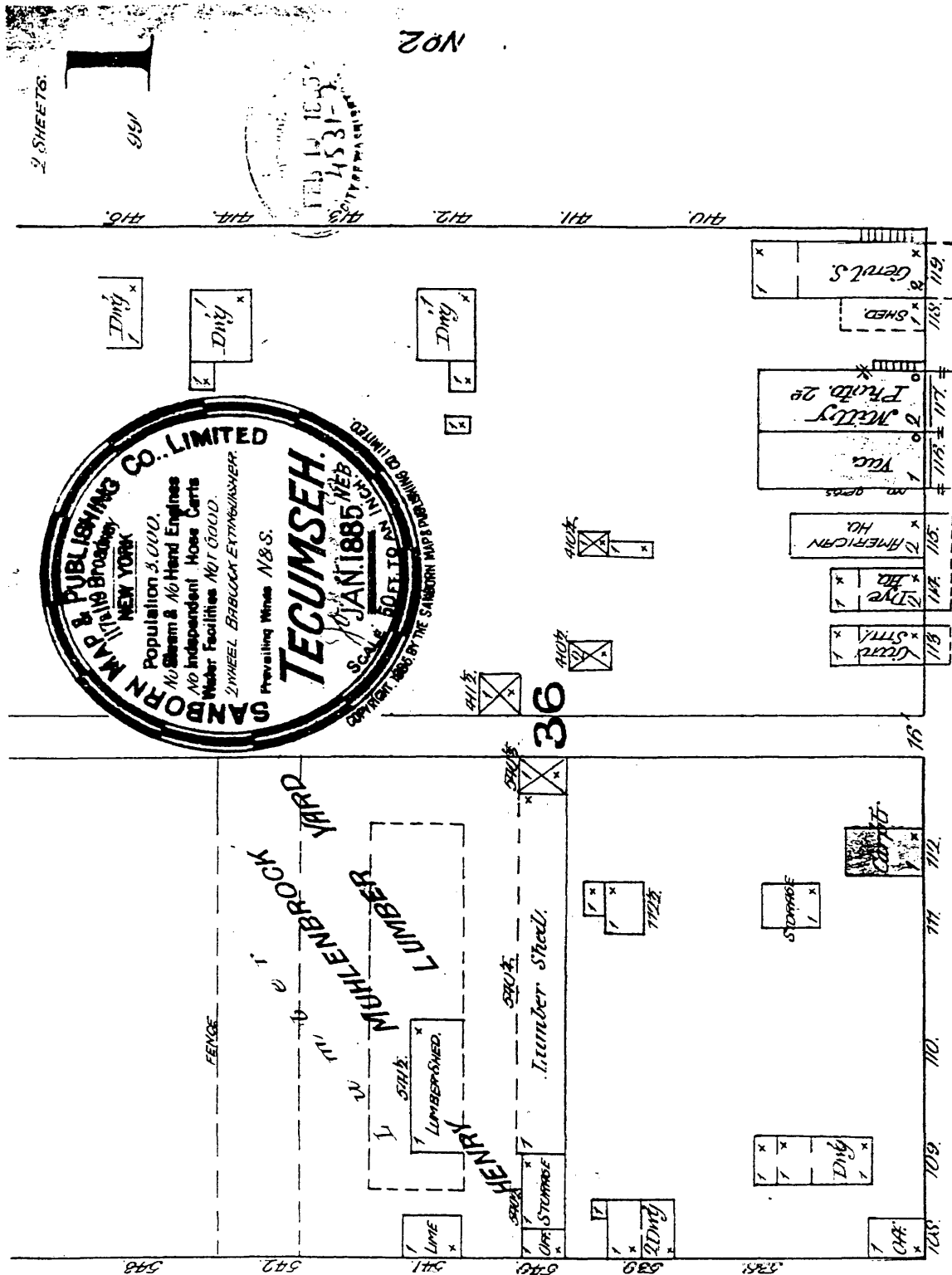


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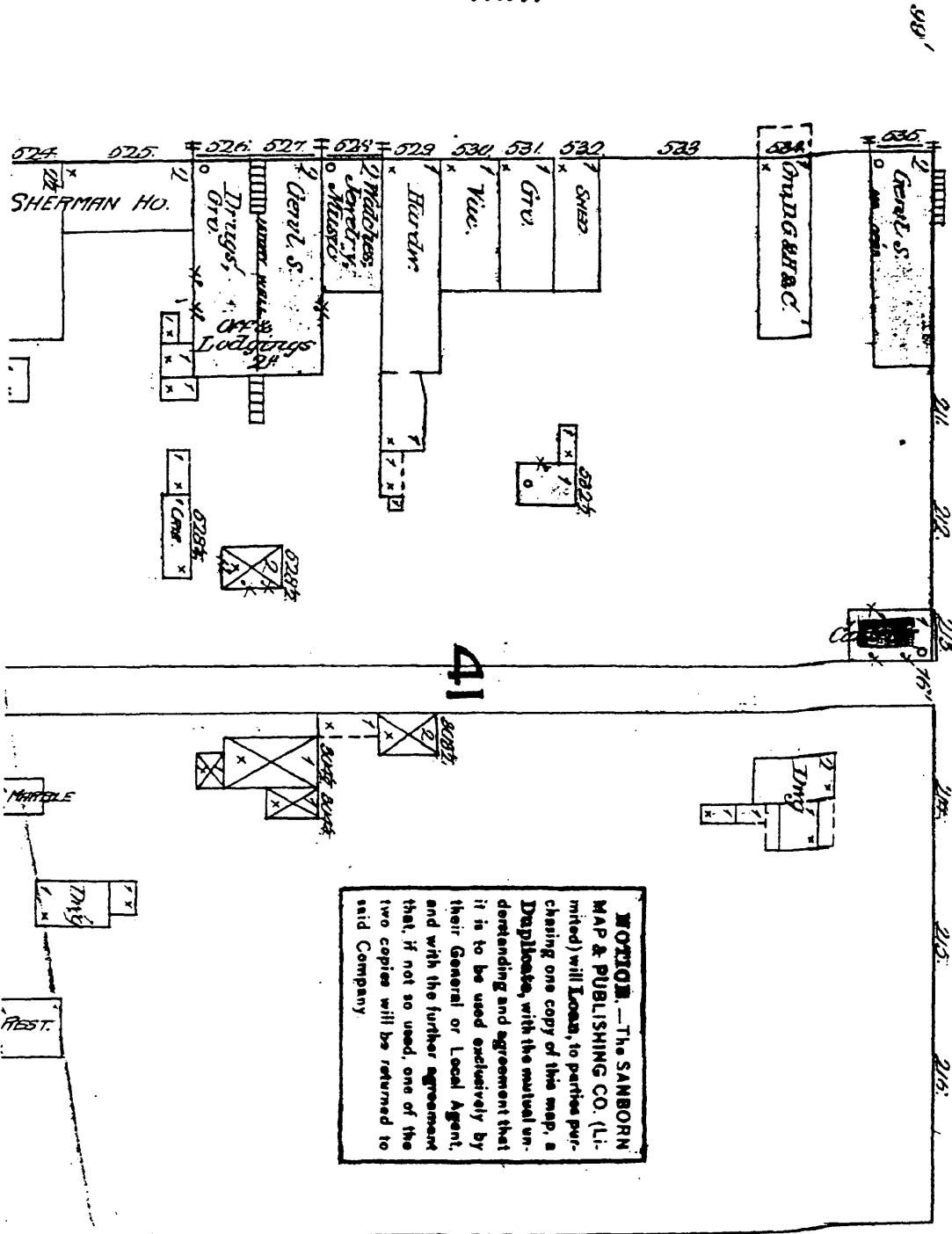
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¹ Johnson County Nebraska, Assessment Books 1873-1876, Johnson County Records, microfilm roll no. 5, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to NSHS), vol. 3, vol. 10, vol. 19.

² Mrs. Knowles memoirs; Luanna McDougal memoir; Mrs. Hoot memoir; Mrs. Hecksthorne memoir; Mrs. W. Trulla memoir; Mr. Murphy memoir; Caroline Hasenyager memoir; "Memoirs Compiled by Johnson County Students, 1922-23," Johnson County Historical Society, Tecumseh, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as JCHS).

³ Gloria Smithes, ed., "A Research Guide to Genealogical Data in Johnson County, Nebraska, and Pawnee County, Nebraska," typescript, 1983, NSHS, 10.

⁴ Elinor L. Brown, *Maps Tell Nebraska History* (Ceresco: Midwest Publishing, 1991), 158; Gloria Smithes ed., "A Research Guide to Genealogical Data in Johnson County, Nebraska and Pawnee County, Nebraska," photocopy, 1983, Nebraska State Historical Society, 10; *The Official Atlas of Nebraska, Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations* (Philadelphia: Everts and Kirk, 1885), 64.

⁵ Anonymous letter, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1873, 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Assessment Book 1873-1876, vol. 3.

⁸ *Portrait and Biographical Album of Johnson and Pawnee Counties, Nebraska* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1889), 153.

⁹ Advertisements, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1873, 1-3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27 September 1873, 2,3.

¹¹ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 201.

¹² Evan E. Evans, "An Analytical Study of Land Transfer To Private Ownership in Johnson County, Nebraska" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1950), 3, 10, 20-26.

¹³ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1882), 2:1007.

¹⁴ Atchison and Nebraska Railroad Company advertisement, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1873, 1.

¹⁵ Thurman Wadley, "The History of the First Johnson County Jail: 1872-1974," typescript, 1975, JCHS, 1.

¹⁶ Kingston Heath, "False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier," in *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture in the Western United States*, ed. by Tomas Carter (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997) 36-37.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 207.

²⁰ John Q Magie and Carl H. Jones, *A History and Historic Sites Survey of Johnson, Nemaha, Pawnee, and Richardson Counties in Southeastern Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 22.

²¹ Johnson County Centennial History Committee, *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956* (Tecumseh: Tecumseh Chieftain Printing 1956), 30.

²² Magie and Jones, *A History and Historic Sites Survey*, 24, 28-30.

²³ Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* revised ed., (Lincoln: J & L Lee Co., 1995), 108.

²⁴ Magie and Jones, *A History and Historic Sites Survey*, 26.

²⁵ "BobTown," typescript, 1971, NSHS, 3-4.

²⁶ Magie and Jones, *A History and Historic Sites Survey*, 23-24, 28.

²⁷ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1009.

²⁸ *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 36.

²⁹ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 4 October 1873, 1.

³⁰ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1009; *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 11 February 1888, 1.

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- ³¹ *Johnson County Journal*, 27 January 1889, 2.
- ³² “Compiled Ordinances and Rules of the City of Tecumseh,” revised and compiled 1905, Office of the City Clerk, Tecumseh, Nebraska, Ord. no. (19) 7.
- ³³ “Making Wet Land Dry And Dry Land Wet,” *Historical Atlas of the United States: Centennial Edition* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society 1988), 140.
- ³⁴ Judge Norris, “Silver Anniversary Celebration Speech,” *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 1st ser. 5 (1893): 155.
- ³⁵ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 21 January 1888, 1.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ *Johnson County Journal*, 27 June 1889, 1.
- ³⁸ National Register Of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form, Tecumseh Architectural District, photocopy, NSHS, 6.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 2-3.
- ⁴⁰ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 June 1889, 4
- ⁴¹ “Compiled Ordinances and Rules of the City of Tecumseh,” Ord. no. (22) 10 sec. 1-3.
- ⁴² *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 June 1889, 5.
- ⁴³ “Compiled Ordinances and Rules of the City of Tecumseh,” Ord. no. (30) 12 sec. 1; Ord. no. (38) 21; Ord. no. (37) 20; Ord. no. (44) 24; Ord. no. (49) 28 sec. 1-2.
- ⁴⁴ *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 43.
- ⁴⁵ Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 204-08.
- ⁴⁶ Sanborn Map & Publishing Company, Insurance Maps of Tecumseh, Nebraska (New York: 1885, 1900, 1909), NSHS.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Wadley, “History of the First Johnson County Jail,” 1.

⁴⁹ Nomination Form, Tecumseh Architectural District, 2.

⁵⁰ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1009.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *The Official Atlas of Nebraska, Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations* (Philadelphia: Everts and Kirk, 1885), 64.

⁵³ Charles Strong obituary, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 21 December 1929, 99.

⁵⁴ Julia Strong, 15 December 1857, Strong Family Correspondence, typescript, NSHS (hereafter referred to as Strong Family Correspondence).

⁵⁵ Gloria Smithes, "Research Guide to Genealogical Data," 6; John Strong gravesite, Vesta Cemetery (approximately seven miles southwest of Tecumseh); William Strong, 5 October, 1856, Strong Family Correspondence.

⁵⁶ Julia Strong gravesite, Vesta Cemetery.

CHAPTER 5

Representatives of a Changing Landscape:

Johnson County's Legacy of Courthouses

The development of Johnson County in many ways has been reflected in the architectural growth of its county seat. The primary representatives of this relationship are the county courthouses built within Tecumseh's community environment. The first of these buildings was erected in 1857, when log construction dominated the built landscape. It was a small, roughly constructed shack, presumably built by members of the Johnson County Board of Commissioners. The commissioners, however, never named this first structure as the courthouse despite its use as a storage facility for county documents. This unrefined building was finally replaced eleven years later in 1868. In reality, this second building became Johnson County's first official courthouse. The building of this two-story frame structure marked the beginning of the community's second phase of development. This era of change, which extended from 1869 to 1874, was characterized by increased construction, a growing use of false-front architecture, and new spatial patterning. The county's third courthouse, an imposing three-story limestone Romanesque Revival building, replaced the old frame structure in 1888-89, and it is that building which continues more than one hundred years later to house the offices of county government. It was constructed during the area's third period of development and is a testament to that era of community boosterism and architectural evolution. The construction chronology provided by the history of these buildings not

only mimics the developmental phases experienced by the populations of Tecumseh but of Johnson County as well.

Johnson County's first phase of growth began with the settlement of a handful of families and the establishment of Tecumseh as the county's first town. John Boulware Sr. and other investors, including John Maulding, A. H. Hickson, J. C. Lawrence, A. P. Drake and George Boulware, sponsored Tecumseh's town plat in 1856.¹ Boulware's group and other early settlers in Johnson County understood the value of locating their settlement near reliable sources of water and transportation. The Big Nemaha River and the Nebraska City – Marysville Trail made this area attractive to settlement. Tecumseh's founders and the county's early officials also saw the advantages of their community becoming the county seat. This perception probably played a big role in Tecumseh's early development. The town plat provided space for a courthouse square and the town's location within the area seems to have also been selected with an eye to its becoming the seat of county government. When the boundaries of the county were redefined in 1857, it became evident that Boulware and his group had established their town within just a few miles of the county's center point.²

A centralized location has often been an essential argument in the election of a county seat. In Knox County a new community, named Center, was established in the middle of the county specifically to fill the role of county seat. On a state level, Lincoln, Nebraska, was established on the foundations of a small community so as to provide a state capital in a more centralized location than that enjoyed by Omaha, the territory's first capital city.³ Boulware and Tecumseh's other original proprietors reportedly sought

to have their community become “the first inland town in wealth and beauty in the Territory.”⁴ As early as September 1856, Noble Strong specifically described Tecumseh as the town designated as the county seat.⁵ Such evidence suggests that Tecumseh’s place, as the county’s premier town, was understood by local settlers well before it was a fact established by law.

Tecumseh’s official designation as Johnson County’s seat of government was passed by the Nebraska Territorial Legislature on 13 February 1857, two days after the legal establishment of the county’s borders. Two months later, on 13 April 1857, the first meeting of Johnson County’s Board of Commissioners was held in Tecumseh. At that meeting the legislative acts which had established the county and assigned the rights of county government to the town of Tecumseh were read into the minutes. Bonds confirming the appointment of the county’s first officers, among them Noble Strong as constable, were also read into the minutes of that first meeting.⁶ With the formalities of county organization and officers settled, the commission moved on to other business. The construction of a county courthouse within the village of Tecumseh was one of the commission’s top priorities, and was discussed at its second meeting. At that session, held 1 July 1857, it was decided that construction of a courthouse building was to be undertaken as soon as possible, using funds raised through the sale of town lots. Tecumseh’s founding investors donated twenty-five town lots and the proprietors of the newly plated village of Lexington donated fifty lots for the raising of courthouse funds.⁷

All of the lots were offered for sale and construction bids were requested. The commissioners moved quickly, for building proposals were to be accepted only until 8

August 1857. No bids, however, were received by this time and at the next meeting of the Johnson County commissioners on 14 August 1857, two new officers were appointed to supervise the project. It was their duty to draw up specifications for the desired courthouse and to seek a contractor for the job. It also was agreed that the new deadline for proposals should be set for December of that year. Completion of this first phase of planning must have seemed in peril of failing again, for at the commission's October meeting the deadline was extended to the board's next regular session in January. The commissioners selected to oversee this process failed to generate a single bid for the construction of the county courthouse and, as late as 5 July 1858, not one of the lots donated by the founders of Tecumseh or Lexington had been sold. The deadline for proposals was extended a final time and set for October 1858.⁸

The minutes of the Johnson County commissioners meeting held 11 October 1858 records only the following facts. No bids or contracts had been secured for the construction of a county courthouse and none of the lots donated for the establishment of a building fund had been sold. The donation of those lots was therefore voided and ownership reverted to the respective proprietors of Tecumseh and Lexington.⁹ Tecumseh's proprietors undoubtedly hoped, through their donation, to provide a boom to the handful of log homes and businesses that made up their community at this time. On the other hand, the donation of the Lexington lots seems to have been no more than a ploy by speculators to establish a town. At the time of the donation, Lexington was only a drawing on paper and that is all it ever was.¹⁰ No mention was made at that October meeting in 1858 of a plan to renew the dream of a county courthouse and the business-

like wording of these documents does not reveal the frustration that the county commissioners or the committee members who had worked on the project must have felt.¹¹

County histories report the construction of a small, twelve by sixteen-foot structure on Tecumseh's courthouse square during August 1857, to serve as Johnson County's first courthouse, but no record of this building exists in any of the journals which record the actions of the County Commission.¹² In 1888, however, Andrew Cook, one of Tecumseh's early settlers and an elected member of the County Board of Commissioners in 1867, recounted the County's courthouse lineage for the *Tecumseh Chieftain*. In this history, Cook stated that the county's early records "were kept with sundry loose papers in a shoe box in a small unplastered building . . . at the south-west corner of the public square."¹³ If the building existed it may have been used only as a storage facility, as it does not appear that the county specifically utilized the structure as a courthouse. Based on the records of the Johnson County Board of Commissioners, rooms were rented from local residents when necessary to house sessions of the district court. On 18 October 1859, warrants totaling six dollars were ordered by the county commissioners to be drawn upon the treasury and paid to A. P. Luek for this purpose and the following year five dollars was paid to A.C. Bivens for the use of his rooms.¹⁴

Whether a building was specifically constructed at this time to serve the county or the crude dwelling described by Andrew Cook was merely used for the purpose of storing county documents and supplies, the existence of such a structure seems likely. This was a building which, based on its description, matched the first homes of Johnson County's

settlers. Given the county's small population of 170 people in 1857, the building of a county courthouse of any size seems more a political and psychological need than a practical necessity.¹⁵ Psychologically the county seat and particularly the county courthouse can be symbols of stability and prosperity.¹⁶ The county courthouse on a town square around which businesses aligned themselves was a typical format in the construction of county seat towns throughout much of the Midwest before the coming of the railroads.¹⁷ This spatial relationship is perhaps an indication of the psychological importance of the county courthouse and presumably the building that held such distinction should also exhibit this dominant relationship. In Tecumseh the desire for a building of this kind remained unfulfilled for many years.

Tecumseh's designation as Johnson County's seat of government was quickly challenged. Supporters of other towns, both real and imagined, demanded a vote on this matter, thinking that they could obtain the plum for their own communities. In March 1858, seventy-six voters filed a petition calling for a vote to select the county seat. A.T. Andreas's *History of the State of Nebraska* attributed the petition to jealousy but it was perhaps more precisely a matter of survival.¹⁸ As a practical matter, any community designated as the county seat was guaranteed business. Citizens from all over the county would visit that town to pay taxes, file deeds, record marriages or deaths and to attend county meetings. At the county's next general election, held in August 1858, the issue was placed on the ballot. Three towns, including Tecumseh, received voter support. Kingston never seems to have existed as a community, except in the minds of its supporters, standing only as a "relay post on an overland mail route between Brownville

and Salt Lake,” yet it received forty-seven votes.¹⁹ Another apparently imaginary town called Centerville received three votes, while Tecumseh received the support of forty-six voters. As no challenger gained the majority vote required to displace Tecumseh, it remained the county seat.²⁰ The importance of this vote to the life of Tecumseh may be indicated in the failure of Kingston or Centerville to develop. Knowing that such a vote could again be requested may have been an additional motivation for Tecumseh to build a proper county courthouse.

During Johnson County’s first decade, a small rough and unpretentious building was sufficient for the needs of county government. It may also have been all that could be achieved at the time and rooms rented from community members alleviated any inadequacies of this first structure. By 1868, however, Tecumseh and its surrounding settlements had begun to take on a new shape. The federal census of 1860 showed 528 inhabitants within the county and by 1870 the total rose to 3,429.²¹ Frame structures were replacing the county’s more humble log buildings and citizens seemingly felt a growing need to replace a shabby building unfit to represent a developing county. In 1865, county commissioners considered levying a tax to provide for the construction of a seminary in Johnson County. Apparently, county officials hoped to utilize the proposed facility to house the offices of county government as well. The motion passed by the Johnson County Commission contained the stipulation that county officers such as the Clerk of the District Court and the Treasurer would be authorized to work in the new building. H. W. Caldwell, an early member of the Nebraska State Historical Society, wrote in 1889 that, “evidently the newness and the poverty of the country were tempting

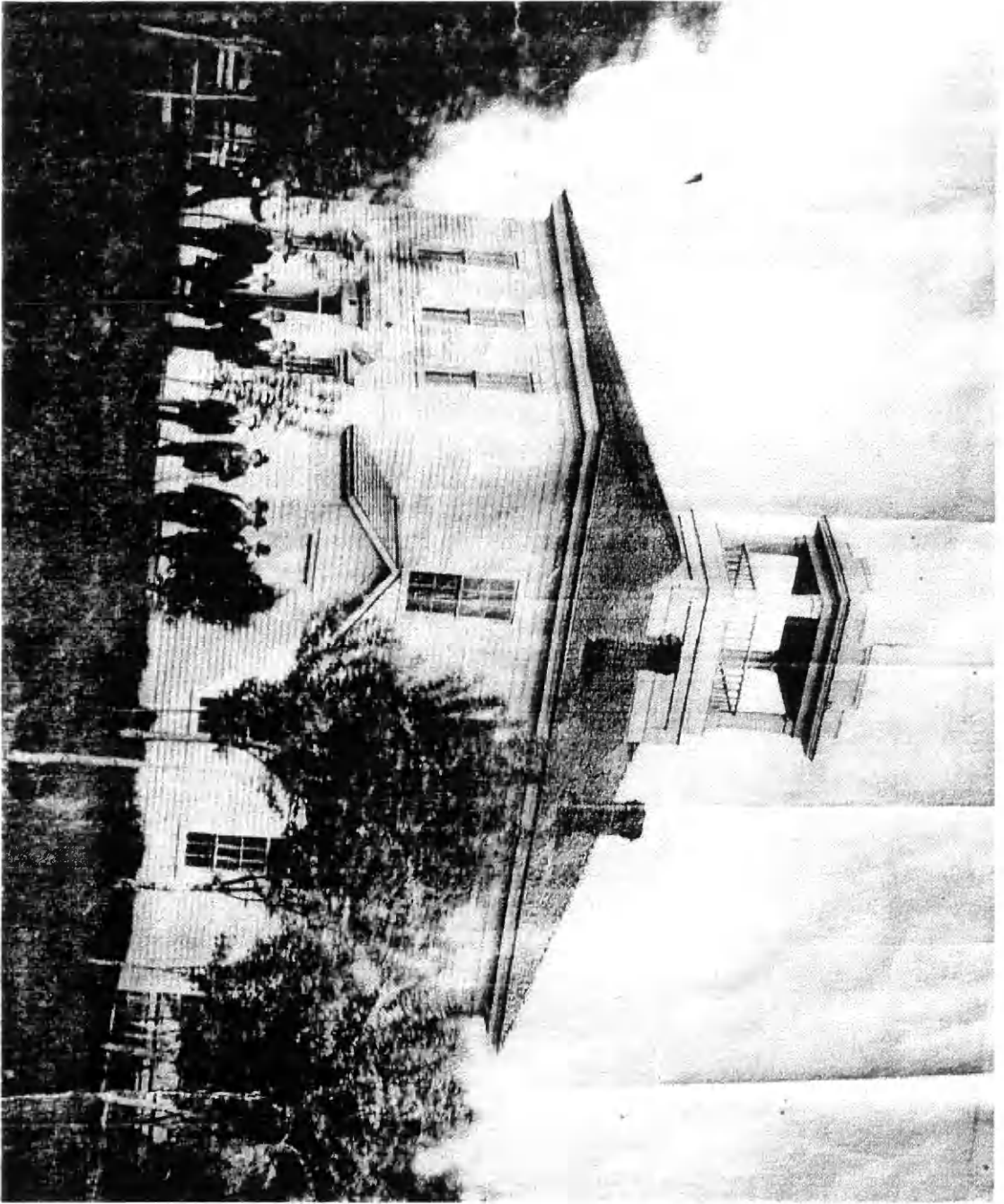
the people of the county to secure a courthouse and school house at the least possible expense. . . .”²² The seminary was never built, but the proposal to use some of its space for county officials suggests an increasing desire to have a more substantial building for county government.

On 3 February 1867, the county commissioners again had called for construction proposals. The building specifications set by the commission were simple: the courthouse was to be built of stone or gravel, stand twenty feet wide by thirty feet long, with walls twenty feet high, including the foundation. The structure was to have two floors; the ceiling of the first floor was to reach eight feet in height, while that of the second floor was to reach ten feet. Building costs were not to exceed \$2,500. Contractors interested in bidding for the job were given one month to file their proposals with the county clerk. Andrew Cook, a member of the County Board of Commissioners, who would be a vocal supporter of courthouse construction twenty-one years later in 1888, entered what seems to have been the only protest against the construction at this time. He requested that the motion be tabled and no further action be taken. Cook’s reasons for protest were not recorded, and work on the construction of a courthouse continued.²³

The commissioners hoped to raise the required building funds through bonds that would be sold at 10 percent interest made payable after five years. In March, the county clerk was ordered to supply each precinct within the county a petition on the subject of a \$2,500 courthouse bond issue. The following month the commission recorded the availability of a \$3,000 loan, which could be funded by the proposed bonds. A

countywide election held in October approved the bond issue and in November, specifications for the proposed courthouse were again filed with the county clerk. These building guidelines now included the possible use of wood or brick and the maximum cost was raised to \$3,000. On 9 March 1868, the county commissioners awarded the courthouse contract to S. L. F. Ward.²⁴ Ward was one of the county's physicians who advertised his surgical skills in the *Tecumseh Chieftain* and the owner of one of Tecumseh's early drug stores. H. B. Bickford was the builder, and the new courthouse was completed during the spring of 1868 at a cost of approximately \$2,600.²⁵

As can be seen in photographs of the courthouse, [Photo 5.1], it was constructed as a simple two-story square frame structure. A square four-posted belvedere with a step gabled roofline crowned the building's hipped roof, which sloped in all four directions. The building's main entrance, while understated, was defined by the pediment captions set above the two windows on either side of the doorway. The doorway frontispiece marking the principal entrance consisted only of a decorative lintel above the door. Its molding echoed that of the window pediments. These artistic elements, while subtle, were none the less of a classical order. In combination with the building's placement on the courthouse square they lent the structure distinction. The photographic evidence shows that the 1868 courthouse was on a scale with its surroundings and can perhaps be viewed as a portrait of the architectural, financial, and social history of Johnson County during the period.²⁶



[Photo 5.1] Johnson County Courthouse erected 1868. Photograph circa 1870.

In the year that followed the completion of the courthouse, the public square was improved by the addition of trees and fencing. Four years later, the county commission began plans for the construction of a county jail on a block adjoining the courthouse square.²⁷ In 1871, refinements to the courthouse continued, with plastering work in the second floor courtroom, masonry work, and new hitching posts.²⁸ According to Andrew Cook, the county commissioners only intended the building to serve the county for a ten-year period. This interval was intended to allow time for the county's population and property values to increase to a level able to support the construction of a new courthouse.²⁹ Ultimately, however, the 1868 building, served the county for twenty years.

In 1882, several years before a new structure was built, historian A. T. Andreas described Johnson County's 1868 courthouse in somewhat condescending terms. This building, he writes, "though not particularly ornate to-day, was, no doubt, considered a grand improvement at the time of its completion."³⁰ Andreas was not the only one who felt that Johnson County's 1868 courthouse had become outdated. Beginning in early 1888, the Johnson County commissioners and a portion of the county's citizenry called for construction of a new courthouse. In February, the commissioners authorized a vote on a \$40,000 bond issue. The bonds would be payable in twenty years and provide funds for the building of a new courthouse.³¹ The reasons for a new courthouse presented in newspaper editorials and letters from citizens varied. Upon review, however, one common theme persists and it mirrors the sentiments of Andreas's remarks. The current building was an embarrassment and did not merit its position stylistically or structurally.

Wiley Sandusky, in a letter to the editor, called the building a “contemptible old scab,” a “bad advertisement for our county,” and a “disgrace to our manhood.”³² Andrew Cook was equally disparaging of the old courthouse. “Age,” he asserted, “has been creeping on imperceptibly.” Cook called the building an “old barn,” and believed it lowered the county in the eyes of visitors. He claimed that the building suffered from rotting timbers and would, if not removed, “fall down under its own weight.”³³

The *Tecumseh Chieftain*, however, may have made the most persuasive argument early in the courthouse debates. The specter of fire, which seemingly haunted Tecumseh’s citizens, was held before them on 11 February 1888, when the *Chieftain* declared that the county’s records were at risk of fire. In the event of fire litigation costs and informational losses would, the paper promised, be astronomical. It also asserted that the danger of such future liability must be viewed in conjunction with the county’s current costs for supplementary office rentals and the annual upkeep of the old building. These undefined amounts when contrasted with the \$40,000 proposed construction budget for a new courthouse would make it clear that the county’s building plan was simply an efficient and effective strategy.³⁴ On 10 March 1888, the *Chieftain* made a less economically based argument, claiming, “Johnson County wants but little here . . . but she needs a new courthouse worse than an old maid needs a husband.”³⁵

Not everyone, however, seems to have felt that the old building had passed its prime. For these citizens the construction of a new courthouse seemed an unnecessary expense. Some of the county’s farmers and smaller communities felt that the building of a new courthouse would provide a boost for no one but the businesses of Tecumseh.

Logically then, they felt that the citizens of Tecumseh should bear the cost of a new building if there was to be one.³⁶ The *Sterling Press*, from one of Johnson County's smaller communities, reportedly opposed the bond issue and worked hard to defeat it. This was viewed by the *Johnson County Journal*, as a "direct fight against Tecumseh and the taxpayers of the eastern and central parts of the county."³⁷ Wiley Sandusky, who called the courthouse an "old scab," made a specific appeal to the area's farmers. He claimed that Tecumseh's residents had already committed their funds and prominence to the building of a canning factory, a project, "which will be a great benefit to the farmer."³⁸ These remarks seemingly explained Tecumseh's inability or unwillingness to fund a new courthouse independently and reproached the county's farmers as well. Sandusky, in his overture to the region's agricultural producers, equated a vote for a new courthouse with "patriotism" and "progressiveness."³⁹

Johnson County's third era of development was marked by the drive of Tecumseh's citizens to reform the town's center. Spurred on by the rhetoric of fire safety and boosterism, the county's primary business district was transformed. Ordinances provided the building guidelines under which this restructuring occurred and the simple lines of the old courthouse no longer fit the image of a forward thinking community. The question of a new courthouse, however, was not considered without some discussion of relocating the county seat. Smartville, which lay over a mile closer to the county's center, drew support as an alternative location, but Wiley Sandusky's thoughts on this idea were curt and to the point: "I don't think Smartville could stand so much prosperity with safety."⁴⁰ Apparently Smartville's supporters were too few to bring the issue to a

vote, and Tecumseh remained the county seat. The citizens of Johnson County, however, did vote on the courthouse bond issue on 14 March 1888. When the ballots were counted, the initiative passed 1,355 to 735 votes. The Sterling District, with the town of Sterling as its center came out, as expected, against the measure 319 to 88. Voters within the Nemaha District, on the other hand, where Tecumseh was located, polled 640 votes in favor of the bonds and only 6 against the initiative. Based on the election results of each district it appears that wards to the west of Tecumseh found simple majorities against the measure while eastern districts voted for it. The only exception to this was Vesta, which lies approximately seven miles west of Tecumseh. Despite this trend, every district, except Sterling, carried a good number of votes in favor of the bond issue.⁴¹ The promotional rhetoric of those in favor of a new courthouse had succeeded, and the funding was secured. The time had come to build the long-awaited “elegant structure.”⁴²

On 15 March, the day following the election, the county commissioners called for the submission of building plans and specifications. With the deadline set for 3 April 1888, interested parties were given less than a month to submit proposals.⁴³ The architect selected was William Gray. A Lincoln-based professional, Gray had previously designed York County’s Courthouse and the plans submitted by Gray to the Johnson County commissioners followed his earlier work. The York County Courthouse, a large Romanesque Revival masonry structure, was begun in 1886 and completed in 1888. Following a visit to that facility, the Johnson County commissioners approved Gray’s proposal.⁴⁴ William Gray later designed both the Cass County Courthouse at Plattsmouth, 1891-92, and the Hamilton County Courthouse in Aurora, Nebraska, 1894-

95.⁴⁵ In Johnson County, with the courthouse building funds and designs confirmed, it was left only to select a builder. On 18 May 1888, sealed bids submitted by various contractors were opened, and the courthouse-building contract was awarded to W. B. Schmucker, a Falls City builder, with a proposed cost of \$40,000.⁴⁶ Before construction could begin, however, the “old barn” had to be removed from the courthouse square. In the end the building was sold and moved to the northwest corner block across from the square.

When the cornerstone of the new building was laid, citizens of Johnson County gathered for the ceremony [Photo 5.2]. Prominent residents and supporters made speeches throughout the day, and a time capsule was assembled and placed within the cornerstone.⁴⁷ The *Chieftain* reported on the day’s events and described the meaning of the “new and costly temple of justice,” in rather poetic terms:

A slight rain began to fall which caused a hurried departure from the square of many, but it was nothing serious, and the crowd took it good naturedly probably thinking that the heavens were dropping a few tears to the memory of the old court house which had served them so long and well, now alas removed and thrown aside for one better fitted to the growing demands of a higher civilization and a riper and more prosperous community.⁴⁸

Construction of the new courthouse, which had begun with the support of both Tecumseh newspapers, was completed amidst expressions of dissatisfaction by the *Journal*. The paper questioned the financing of the project, asserting that Johnson County’s commissioners had reaped large monetary benefits from the undertaking. On 27 June 1889, in an article announcing the official completion and acceptance of the new courthouse by the Johnson County commissioners, the *Journal* noted that the building’s

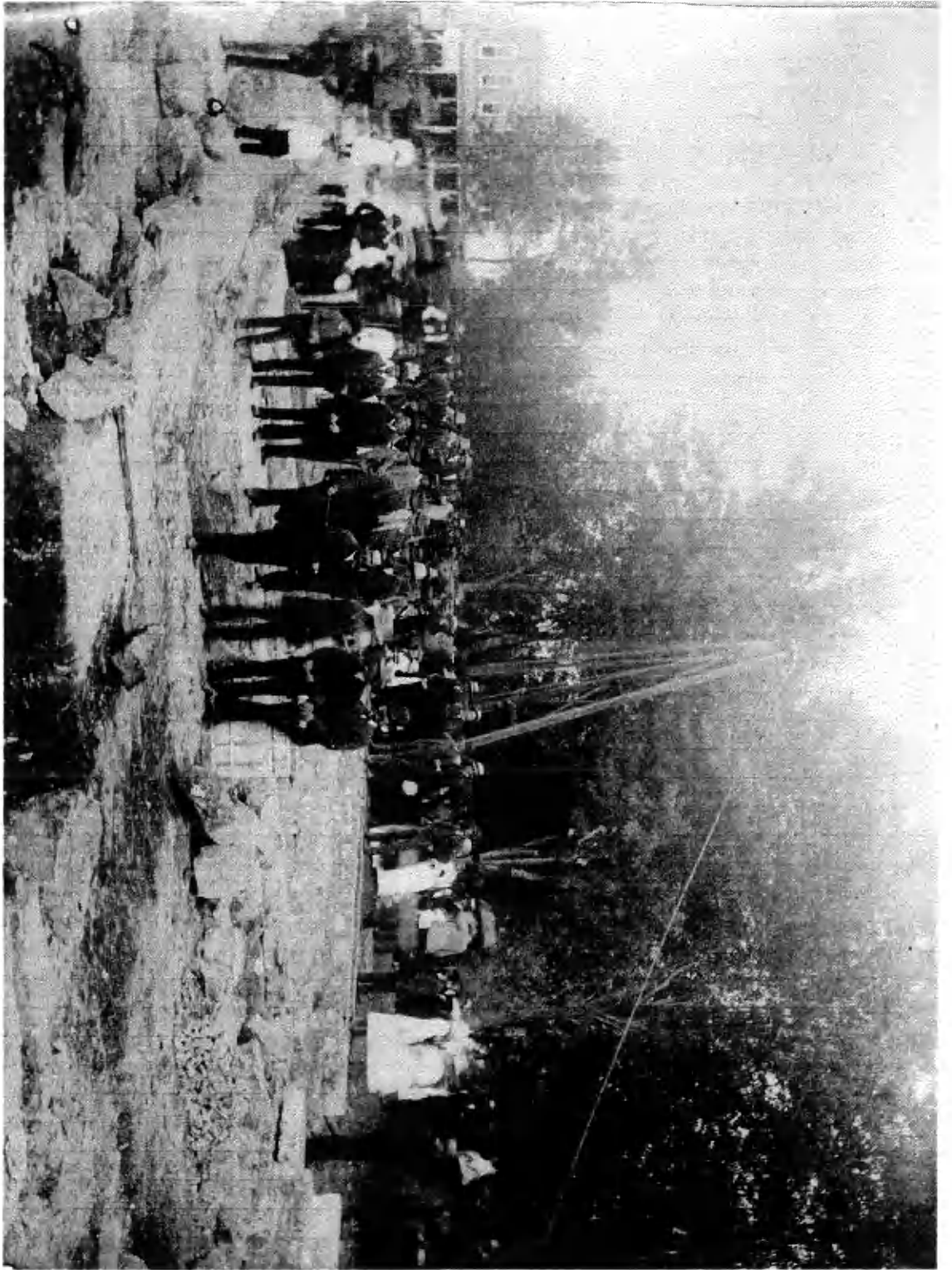
contractor, W. B. Schmucker, had made between 5,000 and 7,000 dollars from the construction process. The paper asked Schmucker “if he had not made big money on the job.” His reply according to the *Journal* was “that he had made no more out of it than had the commissioners.” This comment was printed as evidence of the financial misconduct of the county board.⁴⁹

Despite the *Journal*'s concerns, a countywide celebration and dedication ceremony was held on 4 July 1889. A handbill announcing the festivities declared that the day would be filled with “long and varied programs,” including horse racing and fireworks.⁵⁰ Unanimous support had not been available during the building's proposal process or funding drive, nor was it present at its completion. Yet only words of acceptance and approval were printed concerning its day of dedication. Structurally, it seems, the new courthouse had not been a necessity, but the old building had been architecturally unequal to Tecumseh's restructured downtown. The new courthouse, on the other hand, not only equaled its surroundings, as the old building once had during the 1870s, but through its presence, perhaps elevated them as well [Photo 5.3].

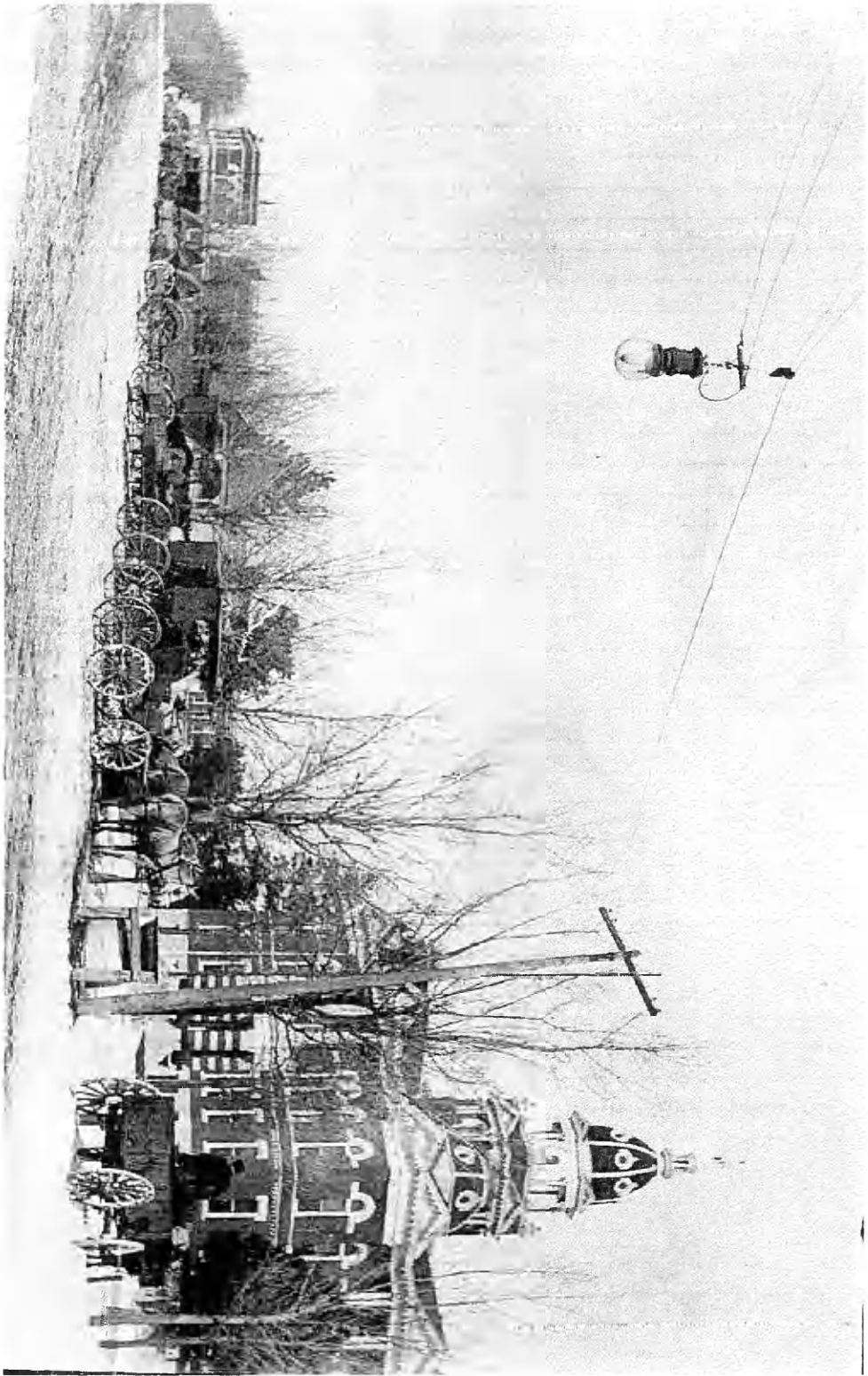
Johnson County's 1889 courthouse is a pretentious structure of a largely Romanesque Revival style and the building dominates the town square. This dominance is created both from the building's size and its architectural elements. Built of local brick and limestone, the courthouse continues to serve as the centerpiece of the town and county. The building's raised basement, constructed of rough-faced limestone, provides a contrasting band of light stone to the two-story red brick structure that rises above it. This color contrast is repeated by the rough-faced limestone banding on the building's

exterior façade between floors, the round arch-head windows of the second floor and the plain lintel windows of the first floor of the building. The theme is also carried in the horizontal banded brick and limestone pillars, which accentuate the building's entrances. A double-tiered, domed tower rises from the building's center and can be seen above the trees from a mile away.⁵¹

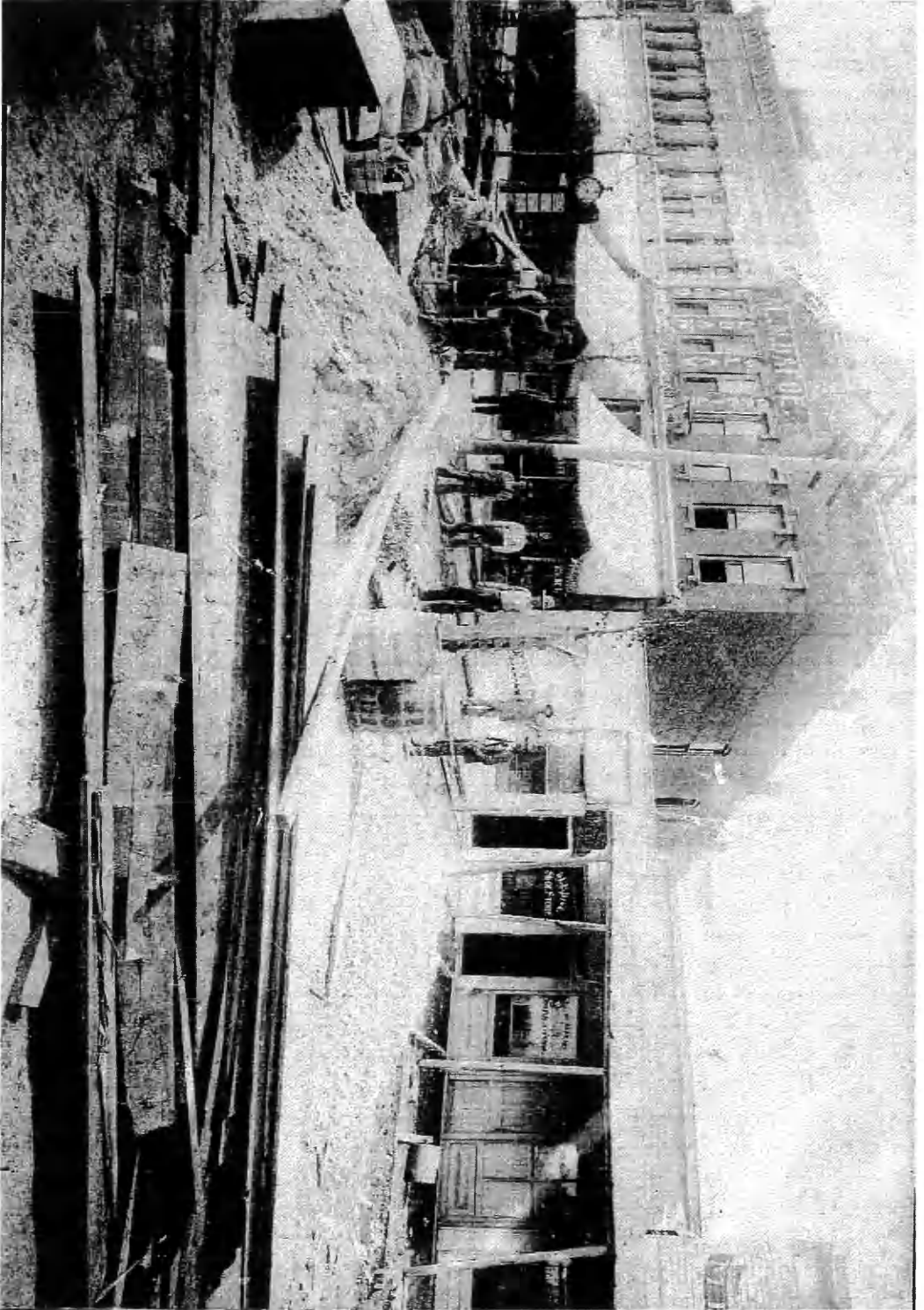
Each of these elements is consistent with a Romanesque Revival design. Johnson County's courthouse, however, unlike a typical structure of this type, is a patently uniform building, providing all sides of the square equal importance through the structure's symmetrical facades. This repeated façade consists of a porch with banded brick and limestone columns, supporting a second story balcony with pediment roof and double column posts. A pointed dome and pediment surmounts each corner of the building, providing a frame for the four entrances and completing its symmetrical formula. Johnson County's courthouse also lacks one essential element of Romanesque design--a Roman round topped archway. The round arch-head windows of the second floor may compensate for this missing element. But whether William Gray's design is strictly Romanesque Revival or a more eclectic Beaux-Arts interpretation of the form, the courthouse, by virtue of its size and pretention, fits the "county capitol style" typical throughout the Midwest at the turn of the century.⁵²



[Photo 5.2] Laying the cornerstone of the new Johnson County Courthouse 1888.



[Photo 5.3] Johnson County Courthouse with electric street lights circa 1900.



[Photo 5.4] Tecumseh, north side of town square, sidewalk replacement in progress circa 1910.

While the architectural style of Johnson County's courthouses was evolving, so too was the landscaping of the courthouse square and town center. According to Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester Jr., a garden exists both as an idea and a place. The idea of a garden has been, they suggest, "an idealization of what society believed that nature should be and should look like."⁵³ Like a Japanese bonsai tree, the garden is nature molded into an ideal. Tecumseh's public square apparently was shaped in much the same way. Structural changes included the removal of wooden sidewalks [Photo 5.4] from the blocks surrounding the square, a project that would have required the cooperation of downtown merchants and town council members. The trees, flowers, and grasses that grace the courthouse square are an important part of this built environment. At one time, a garden walkway connected the railroad station and the south entrance of the courthouse. Known as the "Tecumseh Mall," this park included a fountain and "monumental" stairway. This must surely have been a picturesque setting. The symbolism of nature tamed in a land "conquered" by settlement is intriguing. The "Mall" was dismantled in the 1930s when a community building was constructed between the railway station and the courthouse.⁵⁴ Yet the park-like setting of the courthouse square continues to be very much a part of Tecumseh's downtown environment.

Each of the public buildings that have served the people of Johnson County has also paralleled the overall architectural development of the community. The small, crude structure of the 1850s, while not the building the county government wished for, was equal to the rough, temporary homes of the county's citizens. Within Tecumseh's new commercial district of wooden false fronts, the 1870s frame clapboard building was at

home as well. Reportedly built with an eye to its future replacement, the structure was a transitional building in an evolving townscape. Johnson County's third courthouse, a pretentious monument to the egotistical faith and boosterism of the late nineteenth century, would dominate Tecumseh's downtown as neither of its predecessors had. The building, through its size and architectural accoutrements, was without a doubt intended to symbolize a county which was "confessedly one of the very best in the state," inhabited by, "thrifty, educated people."⁵⁵

Only two of the county's three courthouses have stood upon the town square, yet each building served its turn as the home of county government. In the materials utilized in their construction and in their design, all three structures have represented the county on both physical and psychological levels. Perhaps it is because of this representative status that debates on funding, community obligations, and necessity have been marked with so much interest. The county courthouse is not only a building constructed to house the records of county government and the functionaries of a localized democracy, it is an "architectural self-portrait," and at the turn of the century, it became an "idealized" depiction.⁵⁶

Johnson County's courthouse legacy was established not only in the style of each building but by the kinds of political and social events that took place on the steps and within the halls of these structures. The courthouse and public square reflected more than the architectural preferences and economic faith of the county. These institutions were functional structures that witnessed moments of triumph and tragedy in the lives of Johnson County's citizens as well. Celebratory activities such as old settlers' picnics

were held on the courthouse lawns and church services were conducted in the offices of the old clapboard courthouse. Before the construction of the opera house and the availability of its stage, theatrical performances were conducted in the courthouse as well.⁵⁷ The county clerk recorded inevitable events such as deaths and taxes at the courthouse and late in the spring of 1880, the courtroom of the old building was employed in the unhappy business of hosting a murder trial. Henry Parrish, Fred Blum, George Sohler, John Place, Senet Hill and Tomas Sortel were tried for the murder of Elmer Parker. The murder followed a political argument between Elmer Parker's father, W. F. Parker, and Henry Parrish, and the boy apparently was caught in a crossfire of thrown rocks and fists as he tried to walk his father home. All of those charged were found guilty. Henry Parrish, who had thrown the stone that killed Elmer Parker, received a sentence of fifteen years in the State Penitentiary. Each of the other defendants were fined \$100 each and sentenced to thirty days in the county jail.⁵⁸

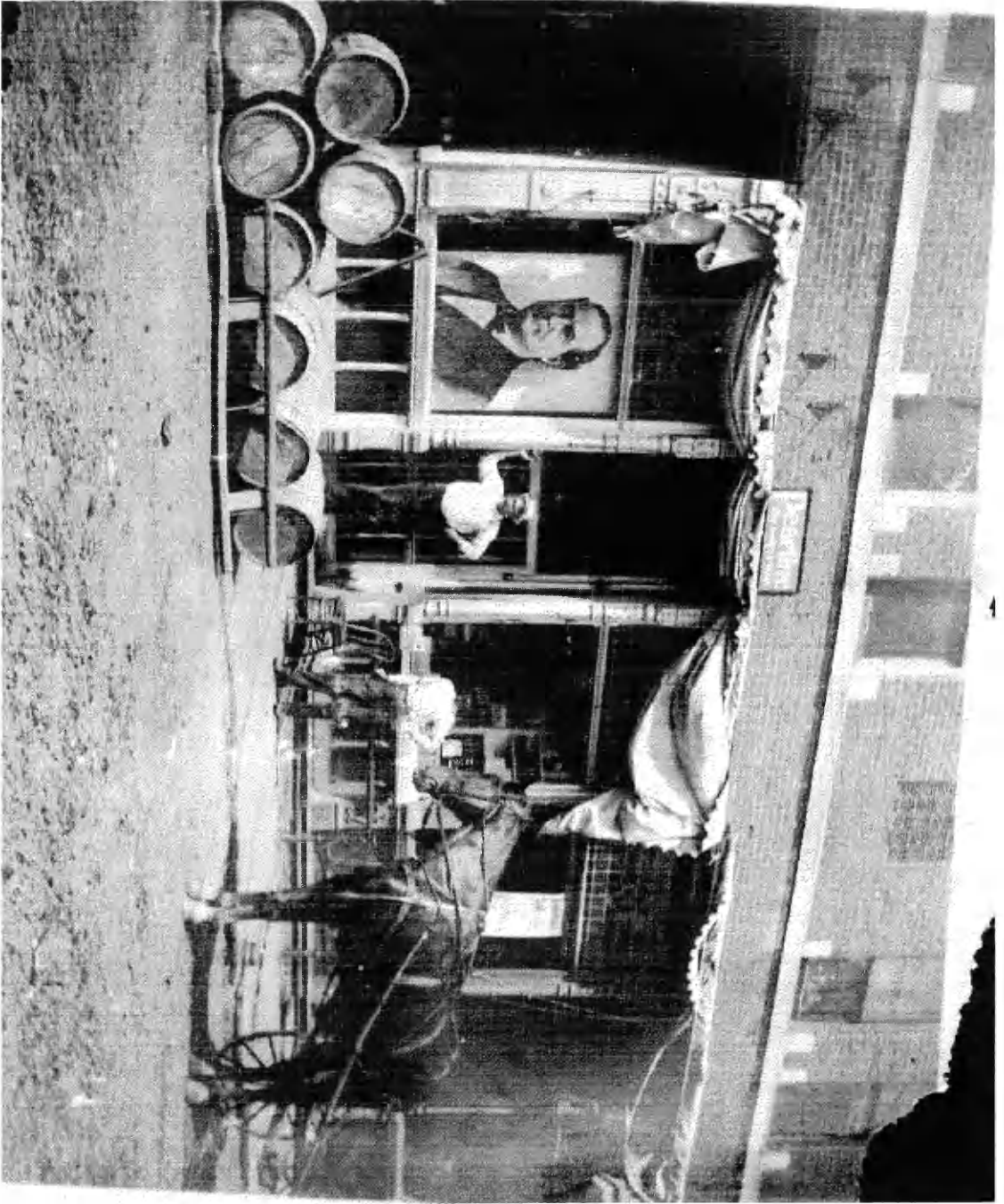
The courthouses of Johnson County have also been the sites of non-violent political debates, meetings, and campaign rallies. In 1872 the county's Grangers utilized the courthouse as a meeting place, as did the anti-monopoly organizers who called out for change from the public square as well.⁵⁹ In 1881, the Farmers Alliance also held meetings at the Johnson County Courthouse, with guest speakers that included E. P. Ingersoll, a resident of the county who also became the first president of the Nebraska State Farmers Alliance.⁶⁰ In 1908 volunteers in the presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan met in the sheriff's office at the courthouse.⁶¹ Despite the Republican majority in Johnson County, Bryan's campaign received the staunch support of the

Johnson County Journal and a large number of voters. Following his nomination, a group of Johnson County residents traveled to Lincoln to lend support to the campaign and hear Bryan's official acceptance speech.⁶² This advocacy was also shown by W. H. Geist, owner of one of Tecumseh's general merchandise stores, who hung a large portrait of Bryan in his shop window during the 1908 campaign [Photo 5.5]. When a funeral parlor opened across the street from his store and the portrait reflected in its windows, the *Tecumseh Chieftain*, a Republican paper, did not pass up the opportunity to declare that some called it an omen for the Bryan campaign.⁶³

On Thursday 15 October 1908, Bryan himself spoke from a platform built near the northern steps of the Johnson County courthouse. One can only imagine the scene from the descriptions provided by the newspapers at the time and the living testimony of the courthouse itself. Party dignitaries and onlookers marched the great man up from the train station to his place on the platform. The bright red and white stone of the imposing courthouse rose behind him and the public square filled with a crowd of approximately 2,500 men, women, and children. What a hush must have gone over the crowd as the man credited with being one of the great orators of his day began his speech at 12:30 that afternoon. According to the *Journal*, everyone was able to hear Bryan speak, despite the crowds. Children were allowed out of school for the day and although Bryan's campaign train had stopped in Crab Orchard earlier in the morning, it seems most of the area's citizens had chosen to attend the Tecumseh rally. At the conclusion of Bryan's speech, the sound of applause must have filled the air of that fall afternoon. The *Chieftain* and the *Journal* disagreed on the persuasiveness of Bryan's speech that day, but both reported

the event in detail.⁶⁴ Ultimately, the Republican majority held in Johnson County and Bryan's bid for election was defeated there, as it was at a national level.⁶⁵ Results of the election held 3 November 1908, were published in the *Journal* nine days later. In Johnson County, William Howard Taft received 1,357 votes, edging out Bryan who captured 1,150 votes. The Prohibition Party's candidate made a showing with 45 votes, and the Socialist Party advanced 9 votes within the county as well.⁶⁶

Bryan had lost his third and final bid for the presidential offices of the United States. Yet his visit to Tecumseh in 1908, the revelry of his brief stop on the courthouse steps, and the meetings of his volunteers within the courthouse halls are all part of the building's history. When such events are added to the gatherings of the Grangers, anti-monopoly men, and Farmers Alliance, the history and aura of Johnson County and its public square take on a vibrant, animated quality. Johnson County's courthouses in their varying forms provided shelter for and a backdrop to each of these causes, as well as celebrations of theater, religion, life, death and the stability of government. Each courthouse structure and event are a part of the legacy still preserved in a town that looks much as it did when Bryan spoke to a cheering crowd in 1908.



[Photo 5.5] E. H. Geist general store with portrait of William Jennings Bryan, displayed in support of Bryan's 1908 presidential campaign, circa 20 August 1908.

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- ¹ Johnson County Centennial History Committee, *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956* (Tecumseh: Tecumseh Chieftain Printing 1956), 33-34.
- ² "The Creation of County Boundaries in Nebraska and Chronological Changes from 1854-1929," photocopy, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as NSHS).
- ³ Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* revised ed. (Lincoln: J & L Lee Co., 1995), 118, 123.
- ⁴ *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 34.
- ⁵ Noble Strong, Tecumseh, 17 September 1856, Strong Family Correspondence, typescript, NSHS (hereinafter referred to as Strong Family Correspondence).
- ⁶ County Commission Journal A, Office of the County Clerk, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 13 April 1857.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1857.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 July 1857; 14 August 1857; 6 October 1857; 5 July 1858.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 October 1858.
- ¹⁰ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company 1882), 2:1004.
- ¹¹ County Commission Journal A, 11 October 1858.
- ¹² *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 42.
- ¹³ Andrew Cook letter, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 10 March 1888, 1.
- ¹⁴ County Commission Journal A, 18 October 1859; 9 October 1860.
- ¹⁵ *The Official Atlas of Nebraska, Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations* (Philadelphia: Everts and Kirk, 1885), 63.
- ¹⁶ Julie A. Wortman and David P. Johnson, *Legacies: Kansas' Older County Courthouses* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1981), 19.

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- ¹⁷ Frederick C. Luebke, "Time, Place, and Culture in Nebraska History," *Nebraska History* 69 (Winter 1988): 154.
- ¹⁸ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1008.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:1005.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Official Atlas of Nebraska*, 63.
- ²² H. W. Caldwell, "An Introduction to the History of Higher Education in Nebraska and a Brief Account of the University of Nebraska," 8 January 1889, *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, 1st ser. 3 (1892): 206.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 3 February 1867, 157.
- ²⁴ County Commission Journal A, 4 March 1867; 1 September 1867; 11 November 1867; 9 March 1868.
- ²⁵ Cook letter.
- ²⁶ For information on structural elements of buildings see James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell, *The Illustrated Old House Glossary* (Washington D.C.: Historic House Association of America, 1963).
- ²⁷ Cook letter.
- ²⁸ County Commission Journal A, 4 April 1871; 17 April 1871.
- ²⁹ Cook letter.
- ³⁰ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1009
- ³¹ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 11 February 1888, 1, 3.
- ³² Wiley Sandusky letter, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 10 March 1888, 4.
- ³³ Cook letter.
- ³⁴ Editorial, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 11 February 1888, 1.
- ³⁵ Editorial, *Ibid.*, 10 March 1888, 1.

³⁶ Sandusky letter.

³⁷ *Johnson County Journal* editorial quoted in *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 10 March 1888, 4.

³⁸ Sandusky letter.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 17 March 1888, 6.

⁴² Cook letter; *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 10 March 1888, 1.

⁴³ National Register Of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form: Tecumseh Architectural District, photocopy, 1975, NSHS, 1, item 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Historic Preservation in Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society Preservation Series, Report no. 1* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1971).

⁴⁶ National Register – Nomination Form, 1, item 8.

⁴⁷ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 28 July 1888, 5,6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ *Johnson County Journal*, 27 June 1889, 2.

⁵⁰ Grand Fourth of July Celebration and Courthouse Dedication, Handbill, Johnson County Historical Society, Accession # 77-29

⁵¹ For information on structural elements of buildings, see Massey and Maxwell, *The Illustrated Old House Glossary*.

⁵² National Register – Nomination Form, 1A, item 8. See Massey and Maxwell, *The Illustrated Old House Glossary*, for information on structural elements; David Gebhard & Gerald Mansheim, *Buildings of Iowa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 526,543.

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- ⁵³ Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester Jr., *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 2.
- ⁵⁴ National Register – Nomination Form, 3, item 8.
- ⁵⁵ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 21 January 1888, 1.
- ⁵⁶ Wortman, *Legacies: Kansas' Older County Courthouses*, 19.
- ⁵⁷ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1873, 1-3.
- ⁵⁸ Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 2:1009.
- ⁵⁹ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 27 September 1872, 2 (Grangers); 3 (Antimonopoly organizers).
- ⁶⁰ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 15 January 1881, 1,4.
- ⁶¹ *Johnson County Journal*, 6 August 1908, 4.
- ⁶² *Johnson County Journal*, 13 August 1908, 4.
- ⁶³ *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 8 August 1908, 4.
- ⁶⁴ *Johnson County Journal*, 29 October 1908, 1; *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 17 October 1908, 1.
- ⁶⁵ *Johnson County Journal*, 5 November 1908, 1,4.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 November 1908, 5.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: “A work of time and circumstance”

When a committee of local residents set out to write the history of their communities to celebrate Johnson County’s centennial year, 1956, they included a section entitled, “For Old Timers Only.” The entry began with the words “Do you remember. . . .” Now more than forty years later, there is no one who can recall “when four horses could hardly pull an empty wagon through the mud in the streets about the square, or the other extreme, where John Stollard hauled water from the Nemaha to sprinkle the streets to hold down the dust.” There is no one left who remembers “when there were hitching racks and iron posts with chains completely encircling the courthouse square,” or “when horses were watered at a big iron trough located at the southwest corner of the square,” or “when there were several wells within the courthouse grounds.” “For Old Timers Only” may have been the title heading a list of reminiscences, but the history they record is for everyone. A litany of dates can be recited and architectural styles that have been favored by a community can be traced, but without such images as those provided by Johnson County’s centennial committee, the memoirs of community members, and the letters of the area’s pioneer settlers, only a static, one-dimensional history of the county could be produced.¹

Bess Foster Smith, whose family was among the many who came to Johnson County following the Civil War, has left a collection of excerpts from her childhood sketch books and diaries. These documents provide a delightful view of one girl’s life at the turn-of-the century. Explaining her impulse to produce this document, Smith writes:

Since I have no quilt scraps to piece together, I have cut from my old diaries and sketch books these scenes from my childhood, so they might live again in memory. By them I may warm my heart and reestablish myself.

I have read that even God can not make of us something we are not; but after we are finished with time, he will hand us back our remembrances, and blessed is the one who has kept them well.²

Most women of Bess Foster Smith's generation and those of her mother's generation like Julia Strong, would have known very well the techniques and value of quilting. They would have understood how fragments of cloth, cut from worn shirts and dresses or salvaged from old finery, could be pieced together, smoothed under loving hands, and sewn into the whole of a new design. Bess Foster Smith attempted to "reestablish" herself by bringing together pieces of her childhood, and like Bess the historian attempts to reestablish the past and understand the intricacies of its design. The history of Johnson County and the alteration of its landscape, like the quilt of her analogy, is a pattern made up of individual lives, economic trends, political movements, and cultural proclivities. The intricacies of this design, like that a fine quilt, is dependent on the interplay of each element.

Political diplomacy and military need may have been the first elements to play a role in the settlement and transformation of the Great Plains. The threat of renewed conflicts between France and Great Britain led Napoleon to offer the Louisiana territory for sale to the United States in 1803. This purchase was followed by the explorations of Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Pike, which provided America its first look at the interior landscape of the continent. The images of the Great Plains presented by these two parties reflected the differences in their feelings about the region as well as differences in the

geographic regions they explored. Their impressions of the landscape, however, provided a basis from which later conceptions of the Great Plains would evolve.³

This knowledge combined with the country's growing sense of nationalism and the ideology of Manifest Destiny brought Euro-Americans to the edge of what would be Nebraska Territory. Removal of the region's Native peoples, however, was still a prerequisite to settlement. The Otoe and Missouri people were among the many tribes who lost their homelands in the expansion of American settlement. They had long occupied the lands of southeastern Nebraska, cultivating their crops and hunting along the banks of the Big Nemaha River. A treaty signed in 1854 changed all that. The Otoe and Missouri gave up their rights to these lands and agreed to resettlement on the Blue River Reservation.⁴

Following the negotiation of that treaty, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law, organizing the territory of Nebraska and opening the region to settlement. The Otoe and Missouri may have been removed to a restricted portion of the territory, but the trails, village sites, and vegetation changes they produced, became the foundations over which white settlements were built. The trails they laid down in pursuit of game and other resources were often superseded by settlement wagon trails, which in some cases then became the routes for railroads or highways. Native American village sites were often built over by the new settlers of the region who also utilized resources such as the Iowa Crab Apple that Native peoples had transported to locations within Nebraska. In this way Native American culture appears to have had a significant impact on Great Plains settlement patterns.⁵

The first communities established in the newly organized territory were built along the Missouri River. Towns like Nebraska City and Brownville became important freighting centers and provided a link to the nation's eastern cities. In 1856 a new town, dubbed Tecumseh by its proprietors, was surveyed within the Territory near the center of an area that would be outlined as Johnson County just a few months later. Tecumseh was named the county seat in 1857 by the Territorial Government and has retained that status ever since. Settlers slowly began to enter the lands of the county in the months before and after its official establishment. This new land challenged men like Noble Strong and Joseph Little, who built rough temporary shelters, cut logs for more permanent dwellings, and broke ground on the area's first farms. It summoned women like Noble's sister-in-law Julia and Little's wife too, women who were confronted with the isolation of the homestead environment, cared for the children and worked in the fields as well as the home. Soon a store and a handful of other buildings would be constructed within the town plat drawn by the proprietors of Tecumseh. These structures, like the homes being built by Strong, Little, and the women of their families, were log buildings of a most unpretentious nature. It was on the basis of these first homely shapes that the town and the county were established.⁶

During the first years of Johnson County's history this small group of settlers, struggled not only to survive, but also to thrive at the edge of "civilization." Fifty miles of bad or non-existent roads separated them from the river towns of Brownville and Nebraska City. Yet while their children were still housed within drafty log shacks and their crops without fencing were at risk from wandering stock, men of this growing

community sought public office and moved to build a county courthouse. Two years were spent discussing the matter and appointing unsuccessful building committees. Ultimately, the first building utilized to store the records of county government was much like the first homes of the county's citizens - small, unrefined, and temporary. It was not the self-portrait they wished to draw but was, none-the-less, a true representation of early settlement in Johnson County. This phase of the community's evolution was only the first in a series of three eras of concentrated growth.⁷

Passage of the Homestead Act, the end of the Civil War, and the arrival of the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad provided momentum for the County's second period of development. The completion of territorial roadways had increased the freight traffic running through the area and as the population of the county and the state grew, the building of a rail line through Tecumseh promised even greater mobility and increased business. In 1868, flush with an enthusiasm for the future and perhaps spurred on by the frustration of past failures, the county commission once again took the initiative in its drive to build a courthouse. With little dissension, a bond issue was passed to provide funding, and a contractor was selected to complete the work. The result of these efforts was a simple, two-story clapboard frame building that took its place on Tecumseh's courthouse square. The structure was adorned with small window pediments, which framed the entrance in subtle allusion to the classical lineage of democracy. A birds-eye view of Tecumseh and the surrounding countryside was provided by a pillared belvedere at the top of the building. To satisfy the community's esthetic sense, trees were planted on the square. The commercial structures of the county seat were changing as well.

Gone were the log shacks that had served the first merchants and the residential style frame structures that had attended the expanding trade of the overland freighters. In their stead, wood false-front commercial buildings were constructed as urbanized spatial patterns were developed. An architecturally defined commercial center was created. Within the framework of that environment Johnson County's second courthouse, while unpretentious, appears to have been equal to its surroundings.⁸

Boosterism and progress were two essential elements in Johnson County's third era of growth. Tecumseh's downtown was rebuilt while smaller communities struggled to benefit from the coming of two new rail lines in the area. Those communities unable or unwilling to accommodate the railroads failed, but in other places new towns were being born. During this time most Johnson County communities began to reach their structural and population peaks. In Tecumseh, brick and iron replaced wood and Victorian styling replaced frontier false-front architecture. Under the ever-present threat of fire, city ordinances were passed to help bring about this change. Community newspapers called for residents and businesses to prepare for prosperity and helped spread the news when the county board of commissioners and other prominent citizens considered the construction of a new courthouse building.⁹

Johnson County's courthouse issue was seen by many farmers as a maneuver by Tecumseh businessmen to boost their community at the expense of the whole county. Those who supported the construction of a new courthouse seemingly believed it to be a chance to redeem the county's image. The old courthouse was called an embarrassment, a firetrap, and a structural nightmare. Johnson County's new courthouse, completed in

1889, dominated the courthouse square and remains to this day the focal point of the community. A pretentious brick and limestone Romanesque Revival building, it is a domed and pillared declaration of Tecumseh's dominance and Johnson County's existence. The occasion of its dedication was a moment of celebration, and since that day the steps and halls of this building, like those that came before it, have been the site of many celebrations and political rallies.¹⁰

Photographs, which survive from the county's early periods of growth, provide an important visual link to the past, just as the memoirs and letters of early settlers provide an important emotional link. By combining these two sources, the county's history is given depth and becomes a testament to the human experience. The Strong family letters, from the first enthusiastic lines written by Noble after his arrival in Nebraska, to Julia's words of exhaustion and hope, contribute to a better understanding of the people who made settlement a reality. Memoirs collected from grandparents by Tecumseh students in 1923 not only furnish information concerning building types, Indian movements, and family histories; they afford a look at what settlers thought it important to remember and pass on. Once these materials have been read, the photographs of Tecumseh and Johnson County take on a new quality. A level of recognition develops, not perhaps of the individual people shown but of the community they represent.¹¹

The grid pattern of the towns and farmland was established in surveys conducted during the early years of the county's history. Justice L. Cozad, Nebraska's territorial surveyor in 1856, drew the invisible lines, which define the county and its townships. Barnum and Drake surveyed the town of Tecumseh on behalf of a group of proprietors

led by John Boulware, and the individual farms laid out in quarter sections were claimed and ploughed by generations of Johnson County farmers. Two maps bear striking testimony to this new landscape. Cozad drew the first of these maps [Map 6.1], in March 1856. His drawing represents a landscape not yet altered by the establishment of Tecumseh and Johnson County. The Nebraska City and Big Blue Road crossing through the area and Cozad's grid sections are shown as the only Euro-American structures yet imposed upon that landscape. Although drawn in 1924, some years after the county's early settlement period had passed, the second map [Map 6.2] presents the landscape of Johnson County much as it would have been in 1900. The land was segmented by private ownership and labeled with the names of property owners. It is a landscape transformed by its occupants. A comparison of these two maps shows that this transformation was "a work of time and circumstance."¹²

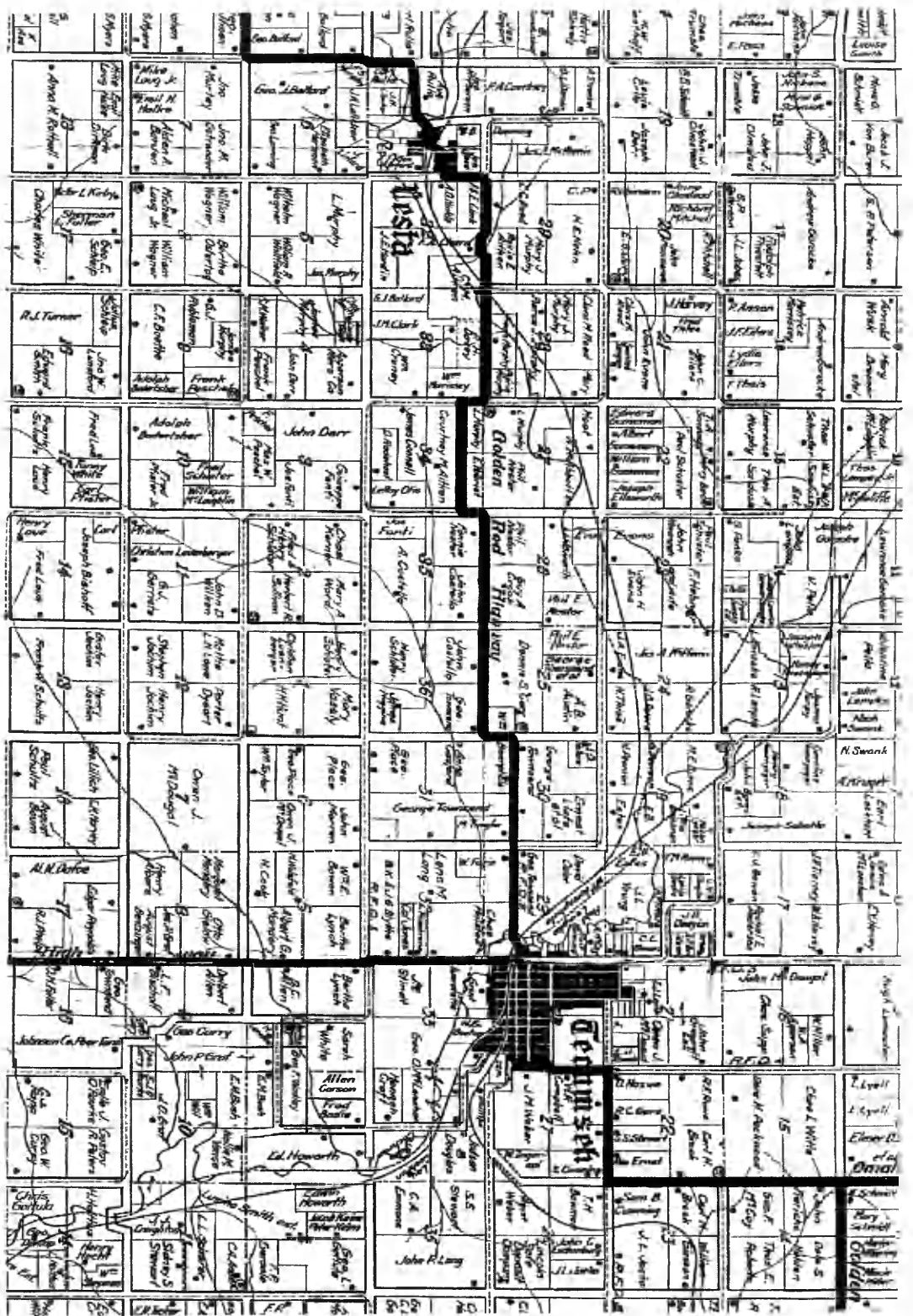
The history of Johnson County and the alteration of the area's natural and built landscapes are, however, more than a quilting together of memories, architectural facts, and photographic evidence. They are a living legacy upon which today's residents are trying to build. Just as county residents in the late nineteenth century worked to assure the prosperity of their region, the residents and businesses of today appear to be working to assure that Tecumseh's motto, "Proud and Prosperous," will hold true in the new millenium. In 1998, the state of Nebraska selected Tecumseh to be the site of a new prison. Communities as far west as Scottsbluff competed for this prize. A debate over the economic benefits of this selection continues but community boosters hope that it will bring new jobs and revenue into the county. Other projects supporting the economic

development of the county have been undertaken as well. Beginning in 1890, poultry have been processed in Johnson County plants. The Campbell's Soup Company operated a plant in Tecumseh for many years and late in 1998, the MBA Poultry Company completed renovations on the old Campbell's plant. On 10 October 1998, MBA held its grand opening.¹³

Amidst these efforts to breathe new life into the area is a growing concern by a determined few to preserve the artifacts and history of the county. The Johnson County Historical Society continues to maintain a small museum in Tecumseh dedicated to this task. An old church building houses the museum collections. A damask dress, a dozen family Bibles, furniture, and myriad other objects huddle together in the safety of the old church. The museum houses a collection of books and other records, but with volunteers and funding growing thin, the building is seldom open and its keepers have been forced to turn off the heat. This has endangered the very history the Johnson County volunteers are trying so hard to preserve. Downtown on the courthouse square the proponents of preservation have been equally frustrated. Although listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Tecumseh's downtown is not safe yet. Most of the old Victorian buildings that make up the character of the town and county are standing empty, victims of dwindling populations and economic hardships.

Tecumseh's city hall and the Johnson County Courthouse were completed in 1889 and are the architectural hallmarks of the historic district. Both buildings need repairs, but the county's commitment to their preservation is questionable. Rumblings have been heard questioning the financial viability of maintaining these historic sites. Tecumseh's

1912 Carnegie library is soon to be replaced by a modern facility. Two pillars guard the entrance of the old library, and some community members may believe that the columns should be removed and used to grace the new structure. What will be done with the 1912 building remains to be seen. Ever an up-hill battle, preservationists continue the fight to save Johnson County's historic past. In the last year leaders of this movement have met with officials from the Main Street program and have begun speaking with other counties within the southeastern part of the state facing similar dilemmas. The success or failure of this small group of dedicated people in the next few years may determine the fate of Tecumseh's historic district. Preserving Johnson County's historic sites, like the development of its settlement era, will be "a work of time and circumstance." Yet if Bess Foster Smith is right and "blessed is the one who has kept his remembrances well," then the effort and expense of the fight will have been worth it.¹⁴



[Map 6.2] Portion of Johnson County Map, 1924. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society

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- ¹ Johnson County Centennial History Committee, *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956* (Tecumseh: Tecumseh Chieftain Printing 1956), 41.
- ² Bess Foster Smith, "Bess's Picture Book," photocopy, 1973, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereinafter referred to as NSHS), dedication page.
- ³ John B. Harrison, Richard E. Sullivan, and Dennis Sherman, *A Short History of Western Civilization* 6 ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985), 509; James P. Ronda ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West: From Conquest to Conservation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 175.
- ⁴ Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 446-50; Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic* 2d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 222; David Agee Horr, ed., *Oto and Missouri Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), 21-22; Lyman Tyler, *A History of Indian Policy* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1973), 71-74.
- ⁵ Melvin R. Gilmore, *Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region* (1919; reprint, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1977), 6; Philip Pregill and Nancy Volkman, *Landscapes in History: Design and Planning in the Western Tradition* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 298.
- ⁶ Rodman W. Paul, *The Far West and the Great Plains in Transition, 1859-1900* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 50; "The Creation of County Boundaries in Nebraska and Chronological Changes from 1854-1929," typescript, NSHS; County Commission Journal A, Office of the County Clerk, Tecumseh, Nebraska; 13 April 1857; Strong Family Correspondence, typescript, NSHS; A.T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company 1882), 2:1003.
- ⁷ County Commission Journal A, 1 July 1857; 14 August 1857; 6 October 1857; 5 July 1858.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 February 1867; 4 February 1867; 4 March 1867; 1 September 1867; 11 November 1867; 9 March 1868.
- ⁹ "Compiled Ordinances and Rules of the City of Tecumseh," revised and compiled 1905, Office of the City Clerk, Tecumseh, Nebraska, Ord. no. (19) 7; *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 11 February 1888, 1; *Johnson County Journal*, 27 June 1889, 2.

¹⁰ Wiley Sandusky letter, *Tecumseh Chieftain*, 10 March 1888, 4; Andrew Cook letter, *Ibid.*, 1; editorial, *Ibid.*, 11 February 1888, 1. For information on structural elements see: James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell, *The Illustrated Old House Glossary* (Washington D.C.: Historic House Association of America, 1963).

¹¹ Photographs courtesy of the Johnson County Historical Society (hereinafter referred to as the JCHS); Strong Family Correspondence, NSHS; “Memoirs Compiled by Johnson County Students, 1922-23,” JCHS.

¹² *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 33; “Nebraska,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, 3 (May 1854): 458.

¹³ *Johnson County Centennial 1856-1956*, 43; *Tecumseh Tidbits: Economic Development Newsletter*, 28 May 1998; 20 August 1998, 12 October 1998.

¹⁴ “Nebraska,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, 458; Smith, “Bess’s Picture Book,” dedication page.

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