

## Jim McKee: John Gregory was a man of many Lincoln 'firsts'



MARCH 29, 2010 11:30 AM

John Stanford Gregory was born in Brattleboro, Vt., in 1833. After being admitted to the Michigan Bar in 1860, he served nearly a year in the Civil War, then returned to Michigan, where he served as a U. S. mail agent, a position which gave him a free pass on all rail and stage lines.

In the summer of 1862, a relative returning from the West told him glowing tales of the salt flats in eastern Nebraska. Using his free pass, he immediately took the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad to St. Joe, a stagecoach to Plattsmouth and a rented horse to Weeping Water. After following an old Indian trail, he arrived at a basin in September, where he found a pastoral area occupied by "herds of antelope by day, coyotes by night," where "no one lived, or ever had lived." After sleeping with some camped Pawnee on Oak Creek, he found J. Sterling Morton's abandoned cabin and a flat area "as smooth and level as any waxen floor (covered with salt) a quarter inch deep, white

as the driven snow."

Returning to Weeping Water, he spent \$8,000 on oxen, wagons and equipment to set up a salt works. At the basin, he "lived in a dugout in the creek bank ... topped with hay and soil ... the front of sod (and) a log fireplace" at the rear.

During the summer of 1863, he reported his "solar vats" could produce "two tons of salt per day," which he estimated cost him \$12 a ton and could easily be sold for \$40 to \$60 a ton to wagons heading west.

On May 23, 1863, Gregory was made postmaster of the first post office in what would become Lancaster County near the later "site of West Lincoln." The position garnered him a salary of \$3 per year plus an additional \$12 a year for taking the mail to Saltillo, which was then in old Clay County.

1863 also saw Gregory elected to a three-year term as county commissioner as well as being elected to the Territorial Legislature in an election in which 55 votes were cast. That July, with Gregory as chairman, the county levied its first taxes - a school tax of 1.5 mills

and road tax of 5 mills.

1864 saw John Cadman of Yankee Hill begin plans to dissolve old Clay County, giving the south half to Gage and north half to Lancaster County, making two rectangular counties of the former three square ones. At first, Gregory opposed the plan but later acquiesced and after Cadman lost support for the county seat, it was easily won by the city of Lancaster, later renamed Lincoln. Gregory also convinced the legislature to appropriate \$500 for a Salt Creek bridge which he planned for Lancaster. Cadman, however, was able to get half of the money for a bridge near Yankee Hill.

In 1866, Gregory turned over the postmaster's job to Frank Bidwell, sold his claim in the salt flats to the Nebraska Salt Co., became one of the six founding members of First Congregational Church, was elected prosecuting attorney for the county and, though he had already been practicing law for four years, became the first man in Lancaster County to be admitted to the state bar. He also established a real estate firm.

In 1880, Gregory still lived in "Section 34 adjoining the city," but by 1885 he had moved to a large house at 1746 K St. and officed in the Union Block at 10th and O streets.

In 1891, Gregory moved to Galveston, Texas, to practice law and continue in the real estate business. In short order, he owned 20,000 acres of Texas land and in 1892 was admitted to the bar.

He was truly a man of many Lincoln and Nebraska firsts - partially because, as he later related, the first year "there were but 11 voters in the county, which was a picnic for office-seekers, for every one could have one."

John S. Gregory died on Feb. 25, 1913, in Galveston.

*Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write to him in care of the Journal Star or at [jim@leebooksellers.com](mailto:jim@leebooksellers.com).*