

Jim McKee: A look at Lincoln's first families



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As soon as Nebraska officially assumed territory status in 1854, the door was open to legal permanent settlers. Before land could be claimed or transferred, the federal government had to survey the area so tracts could be defined in a legal, orderly fashion. The surveys, in general, started with the Missouri River and worked their way westward.

Although a few published reports had told of the salt deposits in today's Lancaster County, the federal survey, which reached here in 1856, spread the word more efficiently, and salt producers arrived in the basin. In spring 1856, W.T. Donovan, a former steamboat captain on the Missouri River, settled on Salt Creek just north of its confluence with Oak Creek, then about Sixth and S streets, and built a dugout. By most accounts, he was the first to use the name Lancaster for the area, after Lancaster, Pa. More settlers arrived in 1856, with most still locating at or near the salt basins.

In 1859, a meeting was called at the great elm on the east bank of Salt Creek, which would today lie in the Burlington rail yards. A committee consisting of A.J. Wallingford, Joseph Forest and W.T. Donovan was instructed to establish a county and determine where the county seat might be located. Donovan again suggested the name Lancaster, which stuck, apparently without objection. On Oct. 15, the first county election was held though no records survive. A subsequent 1860 election noted that 23 votes had been cast but no further records are extant. On July 2, 1861, W.W. Cox and Darwin Peckham arrived at the salt flats and spent the subsequent winter with Donovan, who had by then moved to Yankee Hill.

Milt Langdon arrived in May 1862 and joined several others on the north side of Oak Creek near its merger with Salt Creek. Later that year he built a cabin just southwest of the corner of today's Ninth and Q streets. John Gregory arrived at about the same time, and in 1863 built a cabin, perhaps near today's Charleston Street, and opened the first area post office, which he dubbed Gregory's Basin.

On July 4, 1863, a party of Methodists from Nebraska City arrived, searching for a potential site for a female seminary. This party consisted of J.M. Young, the Rev. Peter Schamp, Dr. John B. McKesson, E.W. Warnes, Luke Lavender and Jacob Dawson. Why they chose the site was not recorded but on July 10, Elder Young acquired 280 acres on Section 23,

dedicating 80 acres for the town of Lancaster with lots set aside for a county courthouse and the seminary.

The stone seminary was completed in 1864, and on Aug. 6 the 64 square-block plat, with eight lots to the block, was recorded. Other settlers who were noted in addition to the original seminary incorporators included J.M. Riddle, D. Bennett, C. Aiken, Robert Monteith and sons, William and John Gay (Grey or Guy), O.F. Bridges, Cyrus Carter, P. Billows and W. Porter. Also listed as being near the city were Philip Humerick and E.T. Hudson, though they would be well within the confines of Lincoln in a few short years.

In 1864, the question of the county seat was put to a vote, with Lancaster receiving the prize which it had earlier been given by fiat. Lancaster's first hotel, the Pioneer House, was built on the southeast corner of Ninth and Q streets in 1864-65, then, after the seminary building burned, John Cadman moved from Yankee Hill and built the Cadman House Hotel using the remaining stone walls just north of the northeast corner of Ninth and P streets.

Sometime in 1866-67, Capt. Donovan returned to Lancaster and built a stone and cottonwood house west of Ninth and Q streets. Here, on July 29, 1867, the Capital Commission met, chose the city of Lancaster as Nebraska's first capital city and changed its name to Lincoln. An observer noted that, at that time, the city of Lancaster had six or seven dwellings, about 30 residents and one building, with a county population of about 500. John Giles was the only name added to the census before Lancaster became Lincoln.

As the state took over the city of Lancaster and overlaid the plat of Lincoln, 22 landholders were given lots in the new capital city. By 1868, the population of Lincoln was estimated at 500-600.

The 1873 city directory showed, of the original names, only nine still resided in Lincoln (Carter, Donovan, Gayley, Gay, Hudson, Lavender, McKesson, Monteith and Young), and a history published in 1889 said by that year the only Lancaster buildings left standing were the stone school and Monteith's shop at 922 P, which then housed Moritz Adler's Pawn Shop. In 1916, it was suggested that Elder Young's second home near 18th and O streets was extant, though "covered with a cement veneer and a porch added." Well into the 20th century, Hudson's cabin was discovered "inside" a small house on South Ninth Street and was reconstructed on the state fairgrounds, and what may have been the remains of the stone school was razed for the Lied Center for Performing Arts.

Thus only the Hudson cabin, now reconstructed and twice moved, remains of the city of Lancaster. But if you recognize a relative among those early settlers you, along with James Young, may be a descendant of Lincoln's first families.