The Meeting under the Elm Revisited: The founding of Lancaster, Nebraska Territory (1859-64): Community emergence and historic memory

Paul Collister

Lincoln, NE
The Meeting under the Elm Revisited

The founding of Lancaster, Nebraska Territory (1859–64): Community emergence and historic memory

Paul Collister

INFUSIONMEDIA
Lincoln, Nebraska
To Diane
Table of Contents

Dedication  iii

Community Emergence and Historic Memory  1

Endnotes  13
Community Emergence and Historic Memory

Probably about 1870, H. J. Hudson, leader of the Mormon colony at Genoa in present Nance County, Nebraska, gave a talk discussing the expulsion of his colony. He depicted Agent J. L. Gillis as a villain who inflated both Pawnee resentments and the Genoa settlers’ fears in order to harry the Genoa colony off its lands to make way for the Pawnee agency. But about a decade earlier, in 1859, Hudson himself and other leaders of the Genoa colony had published a letter in the Omaha Nebraskan that warmly commended Agent Gillis. In the 1859 letter, the Genoa leaders had credited Gillis with an attempt in open council to persuade the Pawnee leaders to select a site that would have spared the Mormon colony. The 1859 letter blamed not Agent Gillis but “outside influences” operating upon Pawnee leaders for the Pawnees’ decision to establish a new agency on the Genoa site.

Historical accounts suggest that the Genoa colony vainly clung to its interests at the former site and then quietly faded away. But Indian Office letters and regular advertisements in the Omaha Nebraskan indicate that the town of Genoa quickly rebuilt on a new site a short distance away. The Genoa settlers used their new location on the banks of the Loup River to run a thriving ferry at the
river at least through the 1860 emigration season, catering par-
ticularly to Mormon emigrants.3

Those contrasts in Genoa's story serve as an example of the
strange things that can happen to human memory with the pas-
sage of time and changing interests. Valuable as old settlers' remi-
niscences and early local histories are, the researcher may still
find surprising details concerning the development of a commu-
nity. Research in documents closer to the times depicted may un-
cover realities that were not supposed to have existed, things that
had dropped out of collective memory that were contrary to nor-
mal procedures or legal definitions. The founding of the village
of Lancaster, the predecessor of Lincoln, Nebraska, in Lancaster
County's Salt Basin may present such surprises.

The traditional accounts of the founding of Lancaster/Lincoln
sketch a rather strange beginning. Local settlers chose a town-
site for a county seat to be called "Lancaster" at a meeting under
a great elm in fall 1859 as part of an effort to organize a county
government. Then these settlers went back to their normal occu-
pations, and the townsite remained entirely uninhabited and un-
developed until the arrival of Reverend John M. Young's colony in
1863.4 But evidence exists that some sort of village had functioned
at Lancaster all along from 1859.

Much of this evidence comes from rather routine references in
the Omaha Nebraskan, which functioned as the semiofficial organ
of Nebraska Territory's Democratic Party during the late 1850s.
This paper was much concerned with the party's organization in
Nebraska, and the Nebraskan published minutes of the territorial
Democratic conventions during that period.

In 1859 and 1860 this paper also announced meeting places
where the local party faithful were to gather to vote for their dele-
gates to the territorial conventions of those years. In 1859 the cen-
tral committee of the territorial party apportioned delegates to the
convention of that year according to the counties' representations

2 * THE MEETING UNDER THE ELM REVISITED
in the territorial legislature.\textsuperscript{5} The central committee instructed Democratic voters to meet at their respective county seats for the vote. Counties that did not rate one delegate by themselves were clustered with other counties. The central committee designated a town, probably the county seat, of one of the clustered counties to be the site of the vote for the electors of those counties. Lancaster County in the 1859 list had one delegate to itself and thus was included among the larger counties covered by the general instruction to gather at the county seats. No towns were named in that general list of the larger counties with their allotment of delegates. The announcement only named the county seats of the host counties for the clusters of smaller counties.

Again, the instruction to meet at the unnamed county seats of the larger counties was a general statement in which those counties that rated at least one delegate by themselves were listed with their allotment of delegates. This list and the instruction to meet at the several county seats all appeared in one block of material, with no towns named. The compilers of that 1859 announcement may indeed not have known anything about the actual conditions in the Salt Basin and under the circumstances did not need to care. The few Democratic voters in Lancaster County would have had no trouble deciding upon whose house to use for the vote.

But the 1860 announcement by the central committee was different.\textsuperscript{6} The 1860 announcement actually named the chosen towns by county or cluster of counties. The elected delegates were to meet at Omaha for the territorial Democratic convention in mid-August. This time delegates for the convention were not simply allotted according to the counties’ representations in the territorial legislature. In 1860 the central committee grouped Lancaster County with three others, with one delegate to represent all four. About midway down its list of counties, the 1860 announcement instructed Democratic electors from Lancaster, Butler, Greene (present Seward), and Calhoun (present Saunders)
counties to meet at the “co. seat of Lancaster” to elect their one dele-
egate. The list mentioned the “co. seat of Lancaster” as if it, like
the other county seats, was a known point that needed no further
description.

In addition, this list all but called the village of Lancaster by
name, although the “Lancaster” in the announcement referred
to the county. The lists of county seat towns in both the 1859 and
1860 announcements had a tendency, not consistently followed,
to write simply “county seat” when the county seat and its county
had the same name. Thus the 1859 Democratic announcement
had directed the Democrats of Hall and Monroe counties to meet
at the “County Seat of Monroe county [sic],” also named Monroe.
Again, this practice was not always followed. The 1860 list featured
“Dakota City, Dakota” at its beginning and “Kearney City, Kearney
co.” at its end. But toward the middle of the 1860 list the “co. seat of
Lancaster” appeared near the “county seat” of Pawnee County, the
major territorial town of Pawnee City that also was not directly
named. The 1860 Democratic central committee, which happened
to include Lancaster County’s 1859 delegate,7 obviously thought
that there was a functioning county seat in Lancaster County. The
committee even bid Democratic electors from three neighboring
counties to come there to vote for their one common delegate.

True, weird things did happen in early Nebraska politics. Ter-
ritorial legislatures seem often to have created counties where
there were no permanent residents. Such had been the case with
Lancaster County’s creation in 1855. Also, in late 1857, there had
still been a bill on the legislature’s docket to build a territorial road
between Plattsmouth and the Lancaster County town of Chester,
which latter existed only in the minds of land and salt speculators.8

But paper counties and imaginary towns could be quietly ig-
ored. The 1859 and 1860 announcements of the Democratic cen-
tral committees did not create “realities” by a legal fiat that they did
not possess anyway. The committees summoned the party faithful
to presumably existing meeting places. In 1860 Democratic voters from four counties were to meet at the “co. seat of Lancaster.” To have traveled overland perhaps for a day or more only to find an empty field in the midst of an area of scattered farms should have caused an intense frustration and confusion that was not at all indicated in the minutes of the 1860 territorial party convention.9

Many readers may wonder if the 1860 announcement may have referred simply to a settler’s farmhouse. Indeed, for Lancaster County settlers any house would do for political meetings. Lancaster County settlers held each of the first county elections of 1859 and 1860 at the rural home of one of the local settlers.10 Ironically, the election of June 1864 that gave the village of Lancaster the official position of county seat over rival Yankee Hill did not take place at either of those villages. Nor was the election at relatively long-established Olathe, newly within Lancaster County due to the division of old Clay County between Lancaster and Gage. Local electors met at the farmhouse of W. W. Cox.11 Six weeks after the county seat vote, the county commissioners of Gage and Lancaster counties met at the home of the Clay County clerk to wind up Clay County’s affairs. The 1889 Hayes and Cox history of Lincoln states simply that the home of the clerk of the defunct county was “near” Olathe, apparently not actually in the disappointed village whose county seat hopes were dying with old Clay County.12 Again, in that local frontier sector, any farmhouse would do for public business.

However, the Democratic central committees of 1859 and 1860 summoned Democratic electors to county seat towns and seemed not to have considered such alternate arrangements. These contrasting assumptions about suitable places to transact public business seem significant. Thus the 1859 announcement faintly hinted that there might have been some sort of functioning county seat in Lancaster County already by midsummer 1859, months before
the “Meeting under the Elm” of the following fall. However, in the absence of other evidence, this cannot be pressed.

Again, concerning the houses, if only a house was intended, which house? As will be pointed out below, the 1860 census indicated that there were some thirty houses that J. S. Gregory’s 1863 post office application placed along Salt Creek from about the mouth of Oak Creek to the mouth of Stevens Creek. Thus, again, which house?

Besides, though Lancaster County settlers carried on elections and other public business in private rural homes, none of those homes or farms was understood as having the role of a “county seat.” The 1859 Meeting under the Elm that selected the Lancaster townsite shows that the Salt Basin settlers shared the assumption of the Democratic territorial central committees that county seats must be towns. In issues of the weekly and daily Nebraskians, if an appointment was meant for a farm or ranch, that farm or ranch was identified as such and the proprietor named. By contrast, the 1860 announcement named the “co. seat of Lancaster” like the other county seats as a known point without such further designation. Again, the 1860 Democratic territorial central committee apparently thought that there was at least some sort of county seat town in the Salt Basin.

On May 9, 1863, a J. S. Gregory also mentioned a village as he applied for the Salt Basin’s first post office. This new post office was to be called Gregory’s Basin, located on Oak Creek a short distance above its confluence with Salt Creek. At least by the 1860s a would-be postmaster had to fill out a printed questionnaire form concerning the proposed post office, its location, and its service area. The applicant also had to furnish a crude map of the proposed location, usually on another printed form featuring section lines. Describing his service area, Gregory stated that there was a “village of twenty three families—population about 125 within two miles” of his proposed post office. He did not say anything to
indicate that this village was brand new. He simply pointed out its existence, thus implying that it had been there awhile. On his questionnaire Gregory gives no coordinates beyond the approximate distance from his proposed location, nor does he offer a name.

Gregory did not have the normal printed form for the map that was to accompany the questionnaire. Thus his map is entirely hand drawn. Though he mentioned a quite substantial village on his questionnaire, he did not mark it on his map. He did make the notation in a long line across his map, “Good settlements on all three creeks,” pointing out a concentration of settlement with its axis along Salt Creek from near the mouth of Oak Creek to near that of Stevens Creek.

The distance stated on the questionnaire and the notation on Gregory's map would fit the Lancaster townsite. Other post office applications from the 1860s and the biographical sketch of J. S. Gregory in Andreas’ 1882 history generally place Lancaster at about the two miles from the Gregory’s Basin post office. Lancaster’s later rival, Yankee Hill, would have been easily twice that distance and also up Salt Creek beyond the area of concentrated settlement marked on Gregory’s map.

In any case, the application for the post office at Gregory’s Basin testifies to the presence of a village in the immediate area in spring 1863, two months before the arrival of Reverend Young’s colony. This is something that was not supposed to have existed. Curiously, this otherwise unknown village of spring 1863 contained four times the residents of the well-documented Lancaster of 1867.

Thus there is evidence that, instead of being only an uninhabited prospective townsite, Lancaster was some sort of functioning village all along from 1859 to 1864, when Reverend Young’s colony took over. But why the complete lack of attestation beyond these two obscure references?

The general remoteness of Lancaster County’s Salt Basin may provide part of the answer. The articles and advertisements of

*Community Emergence and Historic Memory*
the *Nebraska City News* and Brownville’s *Nebraska Advertiser* suggest that those towns’ trade territories extended as far north and west as old Clay County (present southern Lancaster and northern Gage counties), but that the Lancaster County of this period dropped just over the edge of their world. Those two papers and the Omaha *Nebraskan* eagerly reported on overland migration and the Colorado migration and trade, but those streams of traffic bypassed the Salt Basin. Lancaster County’s presence on the *Nebraskan*’s 1859 and 1860 lists only resulted from that ardently Democratic paper’s interest in territorial party organization.

The complete informality of settlement in the Lancaster County of this period may provide another part of the answer. The 1860 census of Nebraska Territory counted 169 persons in Lancaster County distributed among thirty households, large and small. Yet tract book entries and early deeds would lead one to believe that there were no permanent Anglo-American residents in the area. The only tract book entries predating 1860 for land immediately around the Lancaster townsite were eleven filings all made on one of the same two days, September 12 and 13, 1859, on or adjacent to the saltlands distributed through the area. There were also other filings on saltlands through the summer and fall of 1859 further down Salt Creek from the mouth of the Little Salt to Stevens Creek. As was common in frontier areas, the permanent residents of the Salt Basin may have been squatting on the land they occupied. Only in summer 1859 had the Buchanan administration opened Nebraska lands for sale over bitter local protest, as squatters would then be forced to settle up at the new land offices. The Salt Basin settlers may have counted on their remoteness to spare them from official oversight for a while only to find themselves suddenly encircled by extensive, well-organized saltland speculation in September 1859.

Rather than being mere coincidence, the founding of Lancaster and the initial attempt at county organization may have tak-
en place at about the same time in part as moves to counter this abrupt intrusion. But the Lancaster village of 1859–60 would have been an entirely informal cluster of cabins with no legal right to be there. The founding of Lancaster and the first county elections took place years before there was a need in Lancaster County for sustained political organization or an established “seat of justice.”

Further, the aforementioned 1860 census was not set up to pick up informal, unplatted groups of houses. The forms used for that census had a blank at the top of each page following the notation “Free Inhabitants In.” Two of the largest territorial towns, Omaha and Nebraska City, were clearly enumerated by wards. The name of the city and ward number appeared in that blank at the top of each page that listed the city’s residents. For smaller towns, census takers sometimes stated the name of the town at the top of the form, sometimes not, apparently according to the whim of the enumerator. The names of such towns as Beatrice, Fremont, and Pawnee City did not show up in that blank at the top of any of the pages used for their respective counties. The residents of those counties were not listed with reference to any town. The census forms only mentioned the post offices located at those towns in another blank at the top of the forms. Those post offices potentially served a wide rural area around the towns as well as the towns themselves.

If a town did not have its own post office, it might not appear on the enumeration at all. This seems to have happened with the well-attested village of Olathe in old Clay County, which does not show up at all in the Clay County returns. Except for any notation placed in the blank at the top of the page marked “Free Inhabitants In,” the census takers often listed the persons and houses they found without any reference to their locations within a county or relative to each other. This may explain Lancaster village’s absence from Lancaster County’s 1860 census returns.18
In addition to lack of documentation, there is the question of human memory mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The accounts of this earliest period of Lancaster County’s history come from old settlers’ reminiscences that were collected many years after the events described. Editor A. J. Sawyer in his preface to Lincoln’s 1916 history cautioned readers concerning this problem.19

J. S. Gregory of the Gregory’s Basin post office may serve as a graphic example of the change in perspective that can come with the passage of time and altered interests. In 1863 he had mentioned a village of 125 persons and a considerable concentration of settlement along Salt Creek. In 1889 he remembered a desolate Salt Basin with Pawnee and Oto-Missouria hunting camps the only visible human dwellings upon his arrival in fall 1862.20 In 1863 Gregory had been justifying to federal authorities the need for his post office in the Salt Basin. In 1889 the same man was an old settler eager to emphasize the growth of the previous quarter century. In this general manner, an informal, unplatted even illegal cluster of cabins may have simply dropped from local collective memory.

The village of Lancaster emerged from its strangely protohistoric existence with a filing in Township 10 North, Range 6 East, Section 23 where the townsite was located.21 The relevant entry in the tract book is so faded as to be largely illegible but seems to say that a Julian Metcalf used military bounty land warrants to file on a quarter of Section 23. The precise quarter section cannot be made out in the entry. Metcalf filed on June 27, 1863, which is about the time that local accounts assign to the arrival of Reverend John M. Young and his colony. Metcalf was a resident of Otoe County whose land interests were otherwise concentrated in Saltillo Township, some distance southeast of Section 23.22 The entries in the tract book and in an old deed book clearly show that Metcalf patented his filing in Section 23 on May 10, 1864. Four days later Metcalf sold the southeast quarter of Section 23 to fellow Nebraska City
residents Reverend John M. and Alice Young for $140, a bargain at 87.5¢ per acre. The circumstances suggest that Julian Metcalf may have acted as Reverend Young’s agent in acquiring the quarter section.

Though John M. Young may have arrived at the head of a colony in 1863, he had had a somewhat earlier interest in the Salt Basin. In 1862 Reverend Young had negotiated the purchase of land in Section 24 just to the east of Metcalf’s 1863 purchase. In summer 1863, while Metcalf was patenting his purchase, a member of Young’s colony and Young himself filed on other land in Section 24. Then on May 14, 1864, came the transfer by Metcalf to the Youngs of the southeast quarter of Section 23.

Despite his other land interests in the area, Reverend Young clearly intended to establish his colony on the land purchased in Section 23 from Julian Metcalf. On August 6, 1864, two months after the village of Lancaster had officially gained the position of county seat, Young’s colony platted eighty acres of the quarter section as the town of Lancaster. On August 19, the Reverend John M. and Alice Young deeded some of Lancaster’s town lots to the county and other lots to the trustees of the Lancaster Seminary, in both cases for the nominal sum of $1.00.

One can only guess what happened to the village whose existence was mentioned by J. S. Gregory and strongly implied by the 1860 Nebraskan announcement. “Settlement” was a word that could mean only one farm or it could mean a neighborhood of many frontier farms. Lancaster village may have basically emerged as the center of such a dispersed “settlement” or concentration. A number of people who never had had legal title to the townsite anyway may have shifted positions as the townsite formally left the public domain. These people nonetheless may have remained part of the Lancaster or Salt Creek “settlement.” For instance, perhaps only one of the “Lancaster men” who met a Pawnee war party on the upper Big Blue watershed during the
1864 war scare may have lived in the village of Lancaster itself. Two members of that party, J. S. Gregory and William Donovan, certainly did not live in the village in 1864.²⁷

In conclusion, the 1859 (probably September 1859) founding date for Lancaster/Lincoln appears to be considerably more solid than has been assumed in recent years. A tiny village emerging on a particularly remote sector of the antebellum Great Plains frontier may have had a rather more complicated existence than was remembered by early members of the community and recorded in the histories. In Lancaster County’s Salt Basin, as elsewhere, some of the realities of the area’s early history may have fallen through the cracks of collective memory and formal documentation.
Endnotes

5. “Proceedings of the Democratic Central Committee,” *Omaha Nebraskan*, June 18, 1859, 2, col. 3. This was reprinted in later issues over several weeks.
6. *Omaha Nebraskan*, July 14, 1860, 3, col. 1. This announcement was reprinted in later issues of July 1860.

8. *Omaha Nebraskan*, issues of December 1857, which covered proceedings of the territorial legislature.


13. RG 529, U.S. Post Office Department, *Reports of Site Locations* (Lincoln, Neb.: Nebraska State Historical Society), Roll No. 8, “Lancaster–Loup Counties (Application for Gregory’s Basin).” Applications for the post offices are arranged on the roll generally in alphabetical order by name of location.


15. RG 513, U.S. Bureau of the Census, SGI, *Nebraska Territorial Census* (Lincoln, Neb.: Nebraska State Historical Society), S 1, Roll #1, “Lancaster County.”


18. RG 513, *Nebraska Territorial Census*.


26. For the various uses of the word “settlement,” see Sawyer, ed., The Capital City, 76, 19, 126.

27. Compare the lists of Reverend Young's party with the list of the “Lancaster men” of 1864, Copple, Tower on the Plains, 17, and Sawyer, ed., The Capital City, 19. Also, William Donovan did not move to Lancaster village until 1867 as indicated by his absence from the 1866 Lancaster village tax list (Sawyer, ed., The Capital City, 25–26). Meanwhile, J. S. Gregory presumably was still maintaining his post office at Gregory's Basin. See RG 529, Post Office, Reports, applications for Lancaster, Saltillo, and Shirley's Station. In these post office applications from 1864 and 1865 Gregory's Basin continues to be used as a reference point. J. S. Gregory, as postmaster at Gregory's Basin, even certified Jacob Dawson's application for the Lancaster post office at the end of August 1864.