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Shaping Nebraska: An Analysis of Railroad and Land Sales, 1870-1880

Kurt Kinbacher

Spokane Falls Community College in Spokane, Washington

William G. Thomas III

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, wthomas4@unl.edu

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SHAPING NEBRASKA

AN ANALYSIS OF RAILROAD AND LAND SALES, 1870-1880

KURT E. KINBACHER AND WILLIAM G. THOMAS III

On December 23, 1878, Ohio resident D. F. Vanniss wrote to George P. Cather, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad's land agent in Red Cloud, Nebraska. He asked Cather to buy for him "the best 160 acres of R. R. Land in your county," and just to be clear he emphasized, "I want it before somebody else gets it." Cather received many such breathless

letters, urgent, pleading, and intense inquiries about the lands the railroad had for sale. Nearly all wanted to know the position of the all-important railroad. Almost all inquired about the availability of the all-important resource: water. Another buyer, an Illinois man, wrote Cather about "a map of the B + M R. R. Lands" which showed "some full sections are unsold." He requested a particular section of land shown on the map with a stream nearby, and he asked Cather to confirm if there really was "living water" there. Still another man wrote to explain that he was considering pulling up stakes in Indiana and heading west. He predicted that some of his neighbors would follow him if he went, while others were too "cowardly." He expressed great confidence in the "country" and was especially enthusiastic about the prospects of the railroad. "I am well pleased that we are geting [sic] a rail road through our County," he wrote, "and would like to know where it is going through. I think it will be the making of that County. The people here thout [sic] kind of curious that I would go and by [sic] land so far from the railroad."¹

Rail and water, water and rail. These were the indicators of value and future promise on

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Kurt E. Kinbacher teaches history at Spokane Falls Community College in Spokane, Washington. He is co-editor of Reconfigurations of Native North America: An Anthology of New Perspectives, a forthcoming volume from Texas Tech University Press.

William G. Thomas III is the John and Catherine Angle Chair in the Humanities and Professor of History at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is the Project Director of "The Roots of Modern America," a web site that examines the social effects of railroads in 19th-century America.

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the Great Plains in the 1870s. A man or a woman could make something of the land with them, but would probably fail without them, or so it was understood. Economic failure was a real possibility in the depression years after 1873, but the decade was also an era of dynamic growth and change as the effects of extensive railroad building played out in community after community across the region. Vanniss and his contemporaries arrived in Nebraska through a most modern series of events—they read about distant lands, scoured market information, negotiated with brokers and experts on location, and tried to imagine or visualize the possibilities. The Burlington's promotional material touted its route as the "quickest and most direct road" and "the only line" that crossed the Missouri "over the Plattsmouth Steel Bridge." The road itself was the most advanced, direct, and up-to-date means of travel to get to the new lands for sale on the Plains.²

Of course, railroads played the principal role in the development of Nebraska, just as they did in other western and southern states in the years after the Civil War.³ When construction of Burlington and Missouri River Railroad's main trunk began in 1869, the company received a significant land grant and joined the federal government, local governments at all levels, boosters, and other corporations in efforts to "colonize" the Plains. The railroad's modernizing influence took many forms, but the marketing, selling, and opening of its lands had especially significant long-term effects on the Great Plains. The railroad not only shaped the western landscape by privileging access to its network, junctions, and depots, but also shaped the western experience by enabling widespread mobility, immigration, and ethnic diversity.

The Burlington Railroad encouraged and achieved rapid colonization of its lands in Nebraska. When we look closely at the pattern of settlement within counties and zoom in to the process of migration on the ground, even at the section level, we see that migrants from all over the United States lived next to immigrants

from numerous places in almost every 640-acre section of the land grant. This remarkably intense, ground-level diversity was realized because the company had an opened-ended land-contract policy, and because settlers took up the technology the railroads made possible and used it to their own purposes. Indeed, the colonizers—wherever they started from—made a host of decisions and evaluations that shaped Nebraska and its landscape. At first glance, their purposes appear straightforward—to start a homestead, to own land, to speculate on lots. On closer inspection, however, a number of patterns become visible and reveal a more complex story. The consequences of the railroad and its land settlement policies were more dynamic and widely felt than the story of economic development alone suggests.⁴

The settlers who purchased railroad lands were not lured to the Plains by duplicitous land agents or trapped in culturally restricted enclaves after arrival; rather, they took part in a modern process of mobility and movement, one that shaped the unique cultural pluralism of the Great Plains. On the one hand, many individuals responded to recruitment literature that was distributed all over the eastern United States and most of Europe and purchased railroad acreage according to a "modern" settlement model. These immigrants primarily sought economic advantages in an increasingly commercialized agricultural society. They were informed of prospective business opportunities by "mass or public information." But as it turned out, agrarian entrepreneurs were joined by others that arrived using an older "community" pattern of settlement.⁵ These agriculturalists organized their movements around tried and true kinship networks, and they often moved as communities in a process that was relatively closed to outsiders. Their tendency during the 1870s and 1880s was to congregate in "ethnic islands" and migrant clusters.⁶ The confluence of these simultaneous and inter-related movements that the railroad made possible became one of the most surprising and defining characteristics of the land settlement process in the Great Plains.⁷

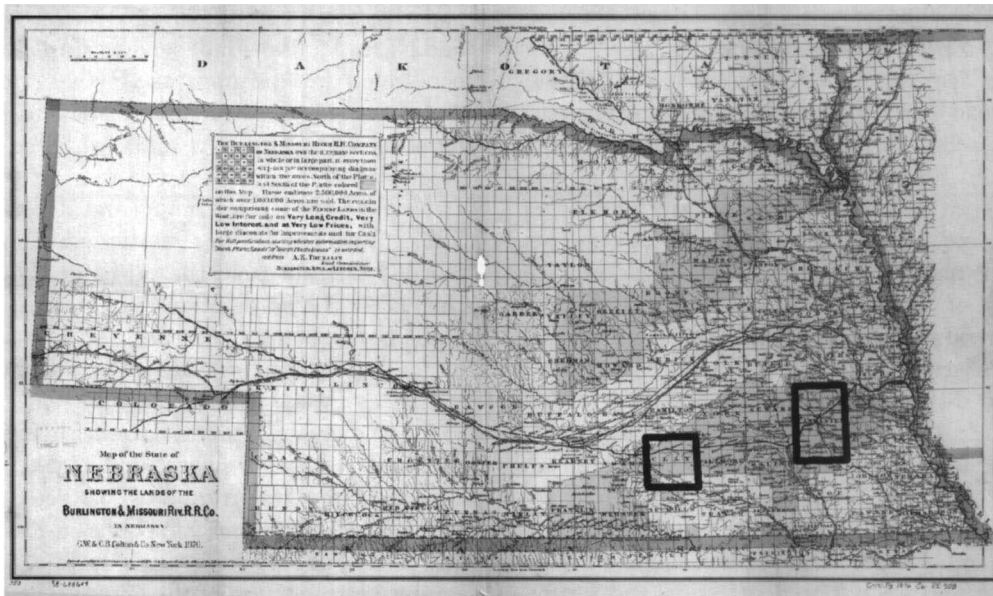


FIG. 1. Map of the State of Nebraska showing lands of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company in Nebraska (New York: G. W. & C. B. Colton & Co., 1876). Courtesy of Library of Congress. (Subject counties appear in dark outline.)

"DENSE SETTLEMENT" IN THE BURLINGTON RAILROAD LAND GRANTS

Colonization of the region was well planned, well promoted, and amazingly rapid.⁸ Indeed, railroad efforts helped Nebraska grow from 120,000 residents in 1870, to 453,000 in 1880, and to 1 million in 1890. According to A. E. Touzalin, the Burlington land commissioner, "dense settlement" of farmers would be the "true foundation for a broad prosperity" for the company, the people within its land grant, and the state in general.⁹ The line's financial health was predicated on the profit potential of freight and passenger services that would be provided an expanding body politic. According to the railroad, vigorous population was the base of the region's and the company's future wealth.

The Burlington land grant in Nebraska dated from the 1864 Pacific Railroad Act, which authorized the construction of a trunk line passing through territory south of the Platte River to intersect with the Union Pacific transcontinental route at or near the 100th meridian. As an incentive to complete this task

the company was granted ten alternate sections of land on each side of the right-of-way for every mile of track completed and inspected.¹⁰ This measure augmented an 1862 act designed to connect the East and West coasts. The specific purpose of the latter legislation was to persuade "Midwestern Regional" roads, such as the Burlington system, to promote colonization.¹¹ To encourage construction, the Burlington received the odd-numbered sections in a number of counties south of the Platte River, specifically: one-third of Otoe, one-half of Cass, all of Lancaster, the southern tier of Saunders, all of Seward, most of Saline, parts of Jefferson, a small portion of Butler, two-thirds of Fillmore, most of Clay, all of Webster save one township, half of Adams, a corner of Kearney, and all of Franklin. Because the Union Pacific already held land on the south bank of the Platte, Burlington officials were allowed to make a claim north of the river that included parts of Dakota, Dixon, Wayne, Platte, Boone, Antelope, Pierce, Valley, Sherman, and Howard counties, and all of Madison and Greeley counties (see Fig. 1).¹² In

all, the road claimed a healthy 2,450,000 acres, nearly 5 percent of the state's total area.¹³

To dispose of this claim, the Burlington Railroad Land Department in Nebraska was organized in 1870, and approximately 600,000 acres in the South Platte region were put on sale April 1 of that year. These parcels included alternate sections in all twenty-four of the townships in Lancaster County—an area in excess of 175,000 acres. Colonization projects began slowly, however, and during the first year of activity a modest 61,623 acres were transferred into private hands. Significantly, 1871 through 1874 were exceptionally active years. In the midst of this boom, the 93,000 acres of land—alternate sections in thirteen of sixteen townships—in Clay County were made available, and the first sales there were made in the fall of 1871. A national recession and severe drought in subsequent years produced fewer sales, but the land market rebounded in 1878 and 1879. Between April 1, 1870, and April 1, 1880, the company disposed of 1,833,396.58 acres of its land.¹⁴ Most of Clay and Lancaster counties were spoken for within this first decade.

Because the Burlington road was intent on “finding a population for its territory,” the railroad served as a pro-immigration force, encouraging settlement on all of the odd-numbered sections the railroad was granted.¹⁵ The Burlington praised the “bountiful munificence of the federal government” for implementing the Homestead Act and made sure that prospective colonists knew that free land from the Government Land Office was “also available within the limits of our land grant.”¹⁶

The rapid transfer of land into individual hands was largely accomplished in Lancaster and Clay counties because both were connected by rail to markets in “Chicago on the east, St. Louis on the south, government posts on the north, and the mineral regions of the west.”¹⁷ In Lancaster County, the main trunk of the Burlington arrived in Lincoln from the northeast in 1870. The following year the Midland Pacific—a subsidiary of the Burlington—linked Bennett to Nebraska City

and the state's capital. In 1872 the Atchison and Nebraska line—independent until 1875—penetrated the land grant, and Firth, Hickman, and Roca were connected to a Missouri River terminal and Lincoln as well. All three lines proceeded to points west the year after they arrived. The Lincoln, Omaha and Republican Valley line—a Union Pacific subsidiary—reached Lincoln from the north in 1880. By the end of the first decade of land sales, most farms in the county had relatively easy access to rail depots, and rural and urban populations swelled as a result (see Fig. 2A).¹⁸

Clay County experienced similar infrastructure and population growth (see Table 1). In 1871 the Burlington trunk was completed to its terminus with the Union Pacific near Kearney, and Sutton and Harvard came on line. In the southwestern portion of the county, the Saint Joseph and Denver City Railroad went through Edgar in 1872. This independent line struggled through financial difficulties throughout most of the 1870s before it was incorporated into the Union Pacific system. By the end of the decade, all townships in the county were within a day's travel of the railroad (see Fig. 2B).¹⁹ Although none of that county's communities were exceptionally large, rural population in general grew at a comparable pace to Lancaster County. As a general rule, each county grew by about 1,000 residents each and every year during the decade.

Colonization required great effort on the road's part, however, and company officials budgeted large amounts of money to engage in modern advertisement campaigns. Between April 1870 and December 1872 the land office spent \$500,000 soliciting in Europe alone. In land terms, as the average price per acre was \$5.47, this amounted to 143 square miles of salable territory. These efforts included printing materials in German, Czech, and Scandinavian languages that were distributed by Nebraska state recruiters, and sending two railroad employees directly to Great Britain. These pamphlets, handbills, and advertisements extolled the virtues of the state, outlined the swiftest routes of travel, and encouraged

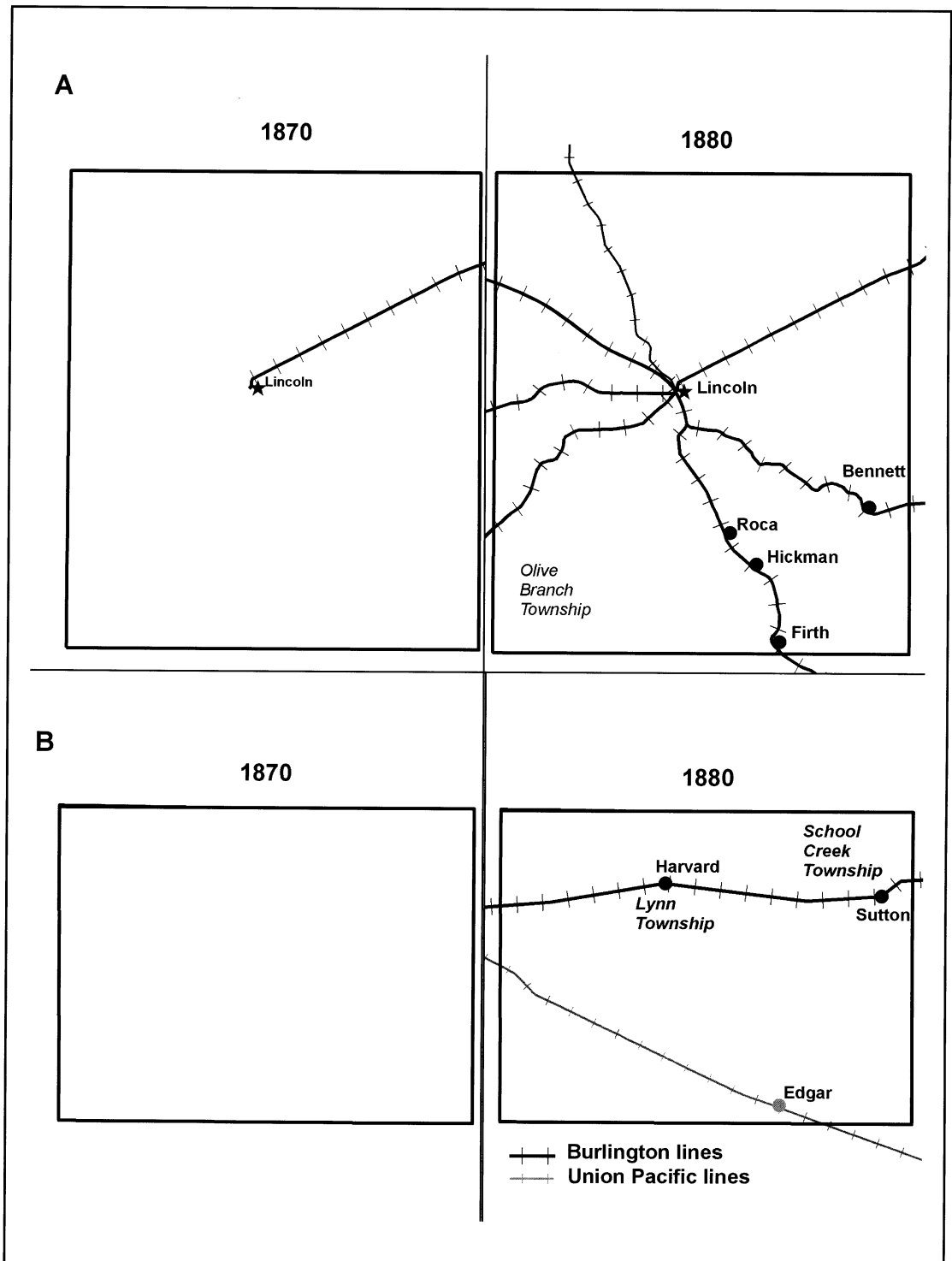


FIG. 2. Growth of the railroad in Lancaster County (A) and in Clay County (B).

TABLE 1
SELECTED CENSUS STATISTICS FOR LANCASTER COUNTY, CLAY COUNTY,
AND THE STATE OF NEBRASKA, 1860-1890

	Lancaster County (total)	Lancaster County without Lincoln	Clay County	Nebraska
1860	NA	NA	NA	29,000
1870	7,074	4,574	54	123,000
1875	15,224	NA	4,183	NA
1880	28,090	15,090	11,294	452,000
1885	39,719	NA	14,201	NA
1890	76,395	21,395	16,310	1,059,000

Source: U.S. Census, Geostat Center: Collections, University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

prospective buyers to engage in land scouting ventures before signing purchase contracts. By the second decade of colonization, the company continued to advertise but at a much more modest cost. Between 1880 and 1890 the Burlington spent \$180,000—a land cost of fifty-one square miles—on brochures, maps, and other promotions.²⁰ By the end of its first decade in the state, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad in Nebraska had constructed a significant transportation grid in the South Platte district, patented a large government land grant, advertised these estates successfully, and sold virtually all of its lands in Clay and Lancaster counties. Its efforts were remarkably efficient at every turn. Ultimately, settlement was “dense” enough to generate a profitable business for the company.

DENSE DIVERSITY ON THE RAILROAD LAND GRANT

In the first decade of Burlington land sales, 2,468 contracts were completed in Lancaster County, and 1,211 contracts were made in Clay County. Because the Burlington Land Office encouraged all comers, moved quickly to sell its lands, and engaged in a widely promoted marketing campaign, people from all over the United States and Europe moved into these

counties (see Table 2). Settlers came into a landscape with relatively good roads, a fully developed rail system, and a checkerboard pattern of railroad and government or homestead lands available for purchase.²¹ Both the way the railroad marketed its land and the placement and division of the lands promoted a rich cultural diversity in the Plains.

Although these conditions powerfully shaped the land sales process and the character of the counties, both immigrant and native-born settlers alike were interested in building culturally homogeneous communities.²² Those that developed in Lancaster and Clay counties during the late nineteenth century were best defined as “ethnic islands” or native-born clusters.²³ Churches and other social organizations encouraged their formation. There were few cases, however, where single groups were large enough to occupy even a quarter of all the land in a single township, and consequently whatever ambitions or expectations these settlers might have come with, they found themselves immersed in a different landscape.

Individual settlers whose move was motivated by the railroad marketing comprised the majority of the population across the region.²⁴ These “modern” homesteaders on railroad land used company maps, correspondence with agents, and exploratory tickets as methods of

TABLE 2
SELECTED NATIONAL ORIGINS OF BURLINGTON LAND-CONTRACT HOLDERS
IN LANCASTER AND CLAY COUNTIES, 1870-1880

	Clay County contracts per nationality	Percentage of Clay County land-grant contracts	Lancaster County contracts per nationality	Percentage of Lancaster land- grant contracts
USA	624	51	1,161	47
German Empire	141	12	347	14
Bohemia	2	>1	47	2
Sweden	148	12	36	1
Russia	59	5	0	NA
(German-Russian)				
Denmark	26	2	35	1
Norway	7	1	10	1
Holland	11	1	65	3
Nativity not determined	57	5	605	25*

Source: Burlington Land Sales Database, Railroads and the Making of Modern America, <http://railroads.unl.edu>. *Contracts in the first several years contained little information about buyers, and many buyers were absent from census rolls in 1880.

gaining claims to their liking. In general, their interactions with the company were part of an agrarian-business culture. Available letters indicate that perceived advantages were quite personal, but easy railroad access and procuring a farm very much like the wooded and watered Freeman Homestead near Beatrice, Nebraska, were among the most important considerations.²⁵ Railroad promotional materials often addressed these overarching concerns, although there were marked differences in information provided to native-born English speakers and immigrant populations.

Pamphlets and flyers published in English were aimed at individuals already connected to profit-based agribusiness and well-developed transportation networks. They relied heavily on visual representations that were punctuated with brief booster-styled descriptions. Farm productivity and population statistics, for instance, were displayed as tables, and these

projections showed remarkable increases in commodity output and demographic growth. While railroad brochures declared that “the Citizens of Nebraska are Intelligent” and that “Corn is King,” maps and timetables were the main tools used to attract individual American land buyers. The rail system was diagrammed in detail to show prospective customers how best to get to Nebraska. Smaller-scaled maps explained the rail system in Nebraska, and still other more detailed ones highlighted areas in southeastern Nebraska where land was still available. Promotions, of course, encouraged arriving on the Burlington because the line provided a “Safe and Speedy Journey, without delays.”²⁶ As an additional inducement, the price of a land exploration ticket could be deducted from the first interest payment once a buyer chose the land and concluded their contract.

Some individuals clearly studied the maps closely and then wrote to local railroad land

agents whose names appeared in the brochures. These buyers often composed long letters of inquiry, asking about weather conditions, soil, water, wind, insects, vermin, productivity rates, and any other factor that might affect the experience of commercial farming. Willard Grant, for example, made inquiries to Webster County agent George P. Cather asking about four specific 160-acre parcels he scouted on a map. Paying attention to mapped creeks, he was specifically interested in lands that contained "rapidly" running streams, a water table appropriate for drilling wells, the possibility of fruit cultivation, a reasonable amount of level land if said streams produced bluffs, and the availability of timber.²⁷

Grant's concerns were common enough that the company felt obligated to address issues of water and timber in its promotional literature. Significantly, the railroad did this most effectively in pamphlets aimed at immigrant populations. German-language materials contained detailed verbal descriptions rather than maps and tables. These discussions attempted to turn possible shortcomings into advantages. When discussing timber, for instance, the company admitted receiving "many letters asking about land with wood," and honestly admitted, "We have none." Instead, this particular pamphlet suggested hard coal was inexpensive, readily available, and a superior alternative to the familiar woodlot. The railroad argued that the absence of trees made clearing land much easier. Similarly, water issues were brushed aside. Prospective immigrants were advised that "brooks" were plentiful within 100 miles of the Missouri River, but even in their absence, windmills were inexpensive and the clean water they produced was highly preferential.²⁸

Using this type of boosterism, the company courted individual immigrants from places in the German Empire, Scandinavia, and Bohemia and encouraged them to join the "mixed" but "very good" class of inhabitants already in the Burlington land grant. These estates offered Germans, and perhaps the others, twelve advantages including outstanding climate, fertile land, complete railroad

connections to diverse markets, established schools, liberal sales terms, land titles guaranteed by the federal government, and "relatively low taxes." Teutons were specifically targeted in the late 1870s and early 1880s. These peoples arrived in Nebraska en masse prior to 1873 but opted to either stay in Europe or move to what pamphlet writers called "more developed states" during the hard times of 1874 through 1877. Hoping to revitalize Nebraska as a destination, the literature suggested the state offered "the German agriculturalist more favorable opportunities" than most other areas. To make decisions easier, the Burlington Land Office offered fairly detailed directions on how Germans could come directly to Nebraska from Philadelphia, Baltimore, or New York, the nation's three great immigrant ports.²⁹

Once in the state, German and other ethnic peoples tended to congregate in fairly distinct rural neighborhoods. These communities, however, were often clusters of diverse ethnic individuals rather than truly homogeneous spatial and demographic enclaves. Neither numbers nor land claiming practices would allow other arrangements.

Railroad advertisements generally encouraged the formation of ethnic islands and American clusters.³⁰ English-language publications, for instance, suggested that "immigration into Nebraska at the present time is chiefly composed of thrifty Americans, English, Scotch, and Scandinavians."³¹ Consequently, most neighborhoods would contain large numbers of culturally familiar peoples. German-language publications, on the other hand, identified specific settlements where German peoples resided and generally commented about their religious denominations. The land office also suggested that the southern portion of Lancaster County was "almost half German."³²

At first blush, this accusation seems statistically unlikely. Although Germans in concert were the largest immigrant group in both the state and in Lancaster County, they barely comprised 13 percent of the general population. Still, the notion that "in the southeastern portion of the state," between a "quarter to a

TABLE 3
SELECTED LANCASTER COUNTY POPULATIONS, 1870-1890

	Lancaster County immigrant population from German Empire	Lancaster County total population	Nebraska immigrant population from German Empire
1870	558	7,074	10,944
1880	2,166	28,090	31,034
1890	3,943	76,395	72,618

Source: U.S. Census, Geostat Center: Collections, University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

third of the population speaks the German language," may have been only a slight exaggeration.³³ This was especially true on Burlington land in the four townships in the southwest corner of the county (see Table 3).³⁴ In concert, German-born individuals purchased 175 of the 347 plots sold by the land office its first decade.

Significantly, German emigrants were "mainly small-time farmers, landless sharecroppers, and servants," all disrupted by European industrialization.³⁵ Many of these individuals would have arrived without families and settled first in one of the eastern states. Marriage, family, and movement into Nebraska to own land occurred later in life. Some of these German-speaking individuals would also have been second-generation farmers recruited from Wisconsin, Minnesota, and other states where immigrants were reportedly facing some forms of discrimination.³⁶

Teutonic communities in Nebraska were in the process of establishing a new German American ethnic identity during this first decade of land-grant activity. Few listed their country of birth as "Germany" in either their land contracts or on their census returns. This self-identification was not surprising, as the German Empire only emerged as a unified political entity in 1871. While united by a shared language and culture, Germans were a diverse group whose roots connected them to subregions, cities, and towns more than to

the newly forming nation of Germany. The Germans arriving in Lancaster and Clay counties reported their origins from nineteen different principalities (see Table 4).

The township of Olive Branch in southwestern Lancaster County helps illustrate this phenomenon. Forty-four of 108 contracts were made by Germans from nine different principalities. In this small sample, apparently disconnected groups of Prussians and Hanoverians arrived in bunches during the spring seasons of 1873, 1874, 1878, and 1879. Those hailing from Mecklenburg were likely from the same family, as 60 percent had the surname Mundt, and they all settled next to the first Mundt claim over the course of several years. In 1880 the collective German presence would have barely been an ethnic island even though most of these individuals were likely connected by language and religion (see Fig. 3). A shared identity was likely forged by these divergent groups after they arrived in Lancaster County. Significantly, the progeny of these early settlers almost universally declared their place of birth as "Germany" in the 1900 census.³⁷

Settlement of railroad land in Olive Branch, a place as far from the railroad as anywhere in the county, was dominated by immigrants. In addition to the Germans, Bohemians made forty-one claims in the township, and as a group made up the majority of their cultural kinsfolk in Lancaster County (see Fig. 3).

TABLE 4
SELECTED GERMAN NATIVITY OF BURLINGTON LAND-CONTRACT HOLDERS IN
LANCASTER AND CLAY COUNTIES, 1870-1880

	Reported nativity of Germans in Clay County	Percentage of Germans in Clay County	Reported nativity of Germans in Lancaster County	Percentage of Germans in Lancaster County
Prussia	29	20	114	36
Bavaria	21	15	15	5
Hanover	9	6	47	15
Mecklenburg	0	NA	14	4
Oldenburg	7	5	9	3
Chanhassen	13	9	0	NA
Hesse	3	2	7	2
Holstein	2	1	8	2
East Friesland	2	1	9	3

Source: Burlington Land Sales Database, Railroads and the Making of Modern America, <http://railroads.unl.edu>.

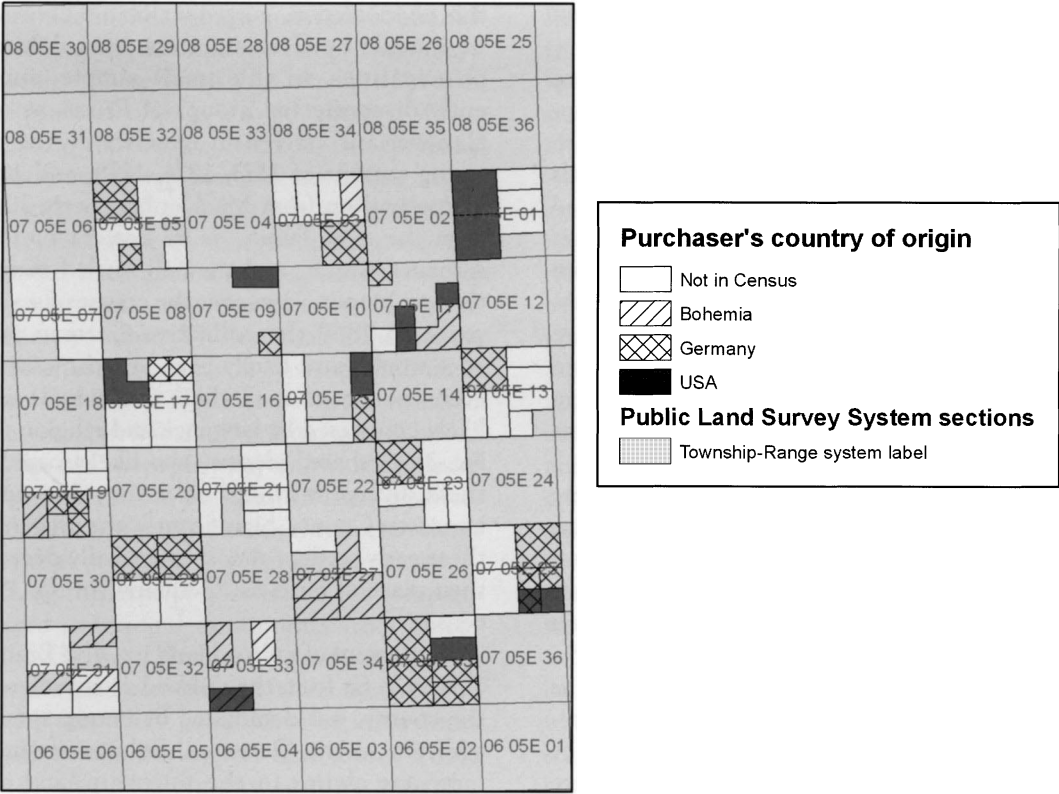


FIG. 3. Ethnicity in Olive Branch Township. (Map by Karin Callahan.)

TABLE 5
NATIVITY AND AVERAGE LAND VALUES FOR PARCELS PURCHASED
IN CLAY AND LANCASTER COUNTIES, 1870-1880

Nativity	Average price of land per acre
Bohemia	\$5.80
Russia (German-Russian)	\$6.24
Sweden	\$6.80
Germany (all principalities)	\$8.14
Wisconsin	\$7.73
Illinois	\$8.28
New York	\$8.44
Pennsylvania	\$8.52
Ohio	\$8.89
Iowa	\$8.98
Indiana	\$9.31

Source: Burlington Land Sales Database, *Railroads and the Making of Modern American*, <http://railroads.unl.edu>.

These Czechs were almost certainly an outpost of larger enclaves that settled just to the west in Saline County.

The immigrant presence in any given location depended not only on the location of ethnic clusters but also on the price of land (see Table 5). A complicated process drove railroad land prices. The Burlington considered proximity to the railroad, availability of water, quality of the soil, and prevailing economic and climatic considerations of any given year. Despite these variances, a few clear patterns emerged. Specifically, the average native-born purchaser was able to afford more expensive lands than the average immigrant.

While the immigrant presence in the railroad's land grant was significant, their numbers were overshadowed by American-born migrants from Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic states who moved to the Great Plains in loosely coordinated efforts. Seventy-eight percent of the state's population was native-born in 1880, with Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, in that order, sending the most individuals.³⁸ Together they

comprised part of a well-documented process of lateral migration. In Lancaster and Clay counties, the percentages of native-born migrants were only slightly lower than the state in general (see Table 6). While they did not necessarily form dramatically new cultural identities in Nebraska, these migrants did tend to settle in clusters.

Migrants from Ohio to Lynn Township in north-central Clay County, for instance, provided a good example of native-born clustering. In total, 40 percent of all claims in the township were made by Buckeyes. The processes they employed in forming their communities favored homogeneity, but settlement patterns were neither exclusive nor necessarily well planned. The township itself was bisected by the Burlington main trunk, and consequently, land values were quite high. The number of claims made by the Ohioans slightly exceeded all the contracts made to immigrants—who tended to settle in less expensive neighborhoods. The Ohio presence was also almost three times greater than claims by individuals from Illinois, the second largest group in

TABLE 6
SELECTED STATE OF ORIGIN FOR AMERICAN-BORN BURLINGTON
LAND-CONTRACT HOLDERS IN LANCASTER AND CLAY COUNTIES, 1870-1880

	Clay County contracts made with Americans	Percentage of Americans in county	Lancaster County contracts made with Americans	Percentage of Americans in county
Illinois	125	20	295	25
Ohio	106	17	191	16
New York	94	15	151	13
Pennsylvania	69	11	108	9
Iowa	46	7	94	8
Wisconsin	68	11	51	4
Indiana	29	5	81	7

Source: Burlington Land Sales Database, Railroads and the Making of Modern America, <http://railroads.unl.edu>.

the township.³⁹ Price, then, was not the only factor in settlement. Clustering played a role as early as 1872. Initially, people from Newburgh, a community near Cleveland, dominated the neighborhood. Other arrivals within the year, however, came from the far corners of the sending state; Thomastown is near Akron, Gallia is in the southeastern corner of the state, and Gomer is halfway between Toledo and Fort Wayne, Indiana (see Fig. 4). This group would be joined by another divergent influx of Ohioans in 1877.⁴⁰ Place of origin was a factor in settlement patterns among native-born migrants just as it was among German immigrants. Similarly, group preferences were never strong enough to allow full spatial control of even small areas.

In contrast, the Black Sea German-Russian settlement in School Creek Township in northeastern Clay County was a true colony. Five complete sections and three-quarters of a sixth were purchased by Grosshans, Griess, and Company on September 4, 1873.⁴¹ These estates were settled by a group of twenty related families who left Europe in June and traveled directly to Nebraska. Over the next six years, members of the community were joined by even more of their kinsfolk who purchased another three sections of land in the township.⁴² In all,

forty of the fifty-nine German Russian claims in the county were filed in this township alone. The other nineteen, some made by Volga Germans, were in three adjacent townships. All immediately established roots in the Great Plains, and their relatives remain on census rolls in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, even areas that contained large colonies also enjoyed remarkable cultural diversity. While the German-Russian settlement was significant and their culture distinct, their nineteenth-century presence was neither spatially homogeneous nor demographically dominant. They bought virtually all of their land from the Burlington line. Although they owned complete sections, the government parcels were claimed by American homesteaders, a situation that led at least to borrowing agricultural methods, if not outright cultural exchange.⁴³ Additionally, a smaller congregation of Swedes from Visby on Gotland Island settled on three sections of land just to the south of the Grosshans group.

Although the Burlington Railroad profited from all types of migrants, they made special efforts to attract colonies from Europe and from within the United States as well. They were quite willing to work with community leaders because these cohesive outposts brought great

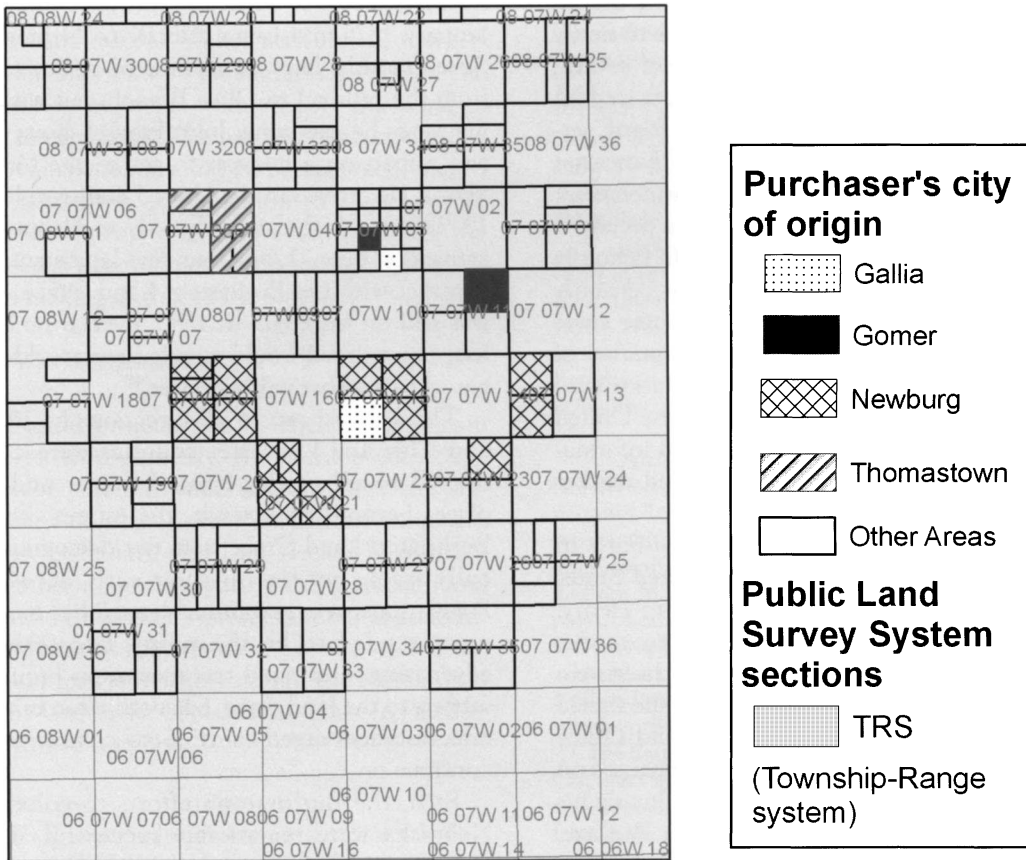


FIG. 4. *Native-born clustering in Lynn Township: 1872 settlement patterns in central Clay County.* (Map by Karin Callahan.)

stability to the places they founded.⁴⁴ In School Creek Township, for instance, most parcels of Burlington land were sold only once. The few exceptions were quickly purchased by German-Russian colonists. In Olive Branch Township, on the other hand, many parcels of land were sold over and over again by the land office as purchasers defaulted on the terms of the contracts. In this mobile nineteenth-century world, it appears individuals were least likely to stick with their claims. It was no wonder that the road announced it was “prepared to send trains not only to Illinois, but other states for transporting members of colonies.”⁴⁵

SPEED, MOBILITY, AND MODERNITY IN THE LAND SALES

Agrarian communities in southeastern Nebraska were part of a very mobile world. The same technologies and information conduits that brought colonizers rapidly to the Great Plains took them other places as well. Indeed, only 37 percent of contract holders that took land in Clay and Lancaster counties during the 1870s appeared on 1880 census rolls for these places. Railroads increased migration speed and accelerated a pattern of movement defined by scholars as “step migration.” According to

this model, families in the antebellum United States moved from developed regions to newly opened territories over the course of several generations. As the nation modernized in the post-Civil War era, however, many settlers, drawn to places like Clay and Lancaster counties in search of economic advancement, moved many times in the course of a decade.⁴⁶

Such high rates of migration held famously true for native-born individuals but certainly applied to immigrants as well. In some cases the railroad made possible the immigration of settlers who put contracts on Nebraska land within five days of their arrival in the United States. Such individual mobility and informational reach for the commercial land market was breathtaking in its scope.

Caroline Kurz, for instance, was born in Wurttemberg, emigrated to the United States when she was twenty-three, moved to Henry, Iowa, at some point, and at age twenty-nine, arrived in Nebraska. After being in the state a mere two weeks, on March 12, 1874, she signed a contract with the Burlington Land Office and took possession of a farm. She remained on this property at least through 1880. Buying his property only a week later, Herman Weilage, Kurz's Prussian neighbor, had a very similar experience. Both individuals were in the prime of their lives when they homesteaded in the township, and they were likely considered "old settlers" by the time of the census. Johann Brucken and August Wilke, on the other hand, bought land near Kurz and Weilage, but they did not stick in Olive Branch. Both men emigrated from Germany several years prior to that nation's unification, settled first in Illinois and Indiana, respectively, and then had short stays in Nebraska before taking possession of Burlington land. Neither appears on the township's census rolls in 1880.⁴⁷

Members of the Bohemian community were part of a later wave of immigration than their German counterparts, but in terms of mobility they were quite similar. Although Nebraska was often their first stop in the United States, they were not necessarily more apt to stay in their original settlements. Vaclav Krenke,

for instance, arrived in the United States in January 1875 and came directly to Nebraska. Seven months later he contracted to buy land from the railroad in Olive Branch, but within five years he was gone. John Frousel, however, was a man on a mission to get to the Great Plains. He arrived in the United States on June 18, 1876, took the train directly to Nebraska, arrived on June 22, and four days later signed a contract with the Burlington Land Office. He was still on his claim in 1880. Even if he had left, the railroad would merely have resold his parcel to another willing buyer.⁴⁸

The railroad ran in all directions by 1880, and Clay and Lancaster counties were connected to all of the United States and to places beyond. As a result, the estates of the Burlington Land Office were not demographically stable entities in their early decades. Populations were certainly "dense," but movement tended to be the norm. Boosterism, advertising, and rapid transportation brought settlers to the land grant, but similar forces and circumstances urged many of the colonizers to continue on.

Still, the Burlington's efforts to colonize Nebraska were remarkably successful. The company's open-ended policy fostered an amazing cultural diversity as people from all over the United States and "desirable" parts of Europe were attracted to the region. Despite being drawn into the state as individuals or families and oriented toward settlement around people of similar backgrounds, settlers found themselves pulled into a process only partially under their control. The railroad's land-sale policies, the speed of the settlement, and the mobility of individual claimants created a remarkably diffuse cultural pattern in the landscape. A few ethnic clusters persisted, but they were the exception, not the norm. Instead, nearly every section of railroad land became a diverse mix of settlers.

These settlers tried to imagine a landscape they had never visited, and to understand its place in a network not yet fully built. They gathered information where they could: about environmental conditions, agricultural productivity,

business opportunities, and social institutions. Railroads offered highly articulated, market-driven information, and railroads enabled the migration of people from all over the world to the Great Plains. The process, characterized by individual mobility and corporate reach, shaped the landscape of the region in ways none of the participants might have expected. Yet the modernity they experienced was as much their own making as that of the railroads.

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NOTES

1. "Letter from D. F. Vanniss to George P. Cather, December 23, 1878," *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*, <http://railroads.unl.edu>; "Letter for N. T. Waters to George P. Cather, October 23, 1878," *ibid*.

2. J. D. MacFarland, Land Commissioner, *B & M Lands in Nebraska* (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1882), unpaginated [folding pamphlet].

3. E. A. J. Johnson, *The Organization of Space in Developing Countries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 59.

4. For a recent account of the social meanings of technology and how people adapt technology to their use, see David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology in Global History since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Edgerton emphasizes a history of "technology in use" rather than invention and the persistence of old technologies among the modern. He calls the tendency to overemphasize the impact of technology "futurism." Here, Edgerton's view is especially relevant because with railroads the question is how people adjusted to them, adapted, and came to terms with their use and meaning. This is predominately a cultural and social question. Other important works focused

on this question include Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), especially 193-209; David Nye, *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), especially 46-47. Nye emphasizes that technology is not deterministic and is "unpredictable," often with "no immediate impact."

5. Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 192-93.

6. Timothy G. Anderson, "Germans," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 233-34.

7. Although this particular discussion relies heavily on Burlington promotional materials, most primary information about the land grant and its inhabitants is part of a forty-two field searchable database that is available on the *Railroads and the Making of Modern America* site. Selected parts of this database have been translated on to a Geographic Information System (GIS) attribute table, and this information has been broadcast onto a related program called ARC Map in efforts define nineteenth-century spatial relationships.

The data were drawn from the 20,000 Preemption Circulars and Land Department Applications that were executed between buyers and the Burlington Land Office between 1870 and 1880. These entries were enriched with information from the 1880 U.S. Census (see Table 7). Individual contracts were recorded and executed by agents of the road in each county where company land was available. There were approximately fifty agents operating statewide during the 1870s and 1880s, generally two per county. Buyers also had the option of visiting the land office in Lincoln. At some point, the contracts were transferred to the main office and recorded into a ledger. All this information is available on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the originals are housed in the Newberry Library.

The ledgers served as the index for this project. Researchers identified the contracts appropriate for each county and then gathered additional information from the various forms of circulars and applications. Further data about many land purchasers were gathered from the 1880 U.S. Census as referenced through *Ancestry.com*. Researchers employed this tool's name index, and then systematically searched the scanned images of the original tract returns for each township to account for the many variables of spelling and to help compensate for handwriting issues.

TABLE 7
RAILROADS AND THE MAKING OF
MODERN AMERICA DATABASE FIELDS
AND SOURCES

Database field	Source
1. ID	Generated by database
2. County	Contract
3. Range	Index and Contract
4. Township	Index and Contract
5. Contract Number	Index and Contract
6. Precinct Name	Census
7. Purchaser Last Name	Contract
8. Purchaser First Name	Contract
9. PO Address	Contract and/or Index
10. Purchaser City	Index and/or Contract
11. Purchaser State	Index and Contract
12. Section Number	Index and Contract
13. Subsection 1	Index and Contract
14. Subsection 2	Index and Contract
15. Acres	Index and Contract
16. Price per Acre	Index and Contract
17. Total Price	Index and Contract
18. Date of Contract	Index and Contract
19. Terms	Index or Contract
20. Gender	Census
21. Notes	Index, Contract, or Census
22. Nativity of Purchaser	Contract
23. Nativity State	Contract
24. Nativity City	Contract
25. Late Residence City	Contract
26. Late Residence County	Contract
27. Late Residence State	Contract
28. Length of Time in US	Contract
29. Length of Time in NE	Contract
30. 1880 Page Number	Census
31. 1880 Household	Census
32. 1880 Dwelling	Census
33. 1880 Occupation	Census
34. Birthplace	Census
35. Birth State	Census
36. Birth Country	Census
37. Father's Birth	Census
38. Mother's Birth	Census
39. Race	Census
40. Certainty of Match (Census/Contract)	Researcher Evaluation
41. Index Last Name	Index
42. 1880 Age	Census

8. For examples and discussion of promotional materials, see "Iowa and Nebraska Lands for Sale" (Burlington, IA: Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company, 1872), unpaginated [folding two-page pamphlet with maps]; Burlington Land Commissioner, "Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company in Nebraska: Premiums for Land Improvements" (Burlington, IA, 1873) [one-page hand bill]; Karen de Bres, "Come to the

'Champagne Air': Changing Promotional Images of the Kansas Climate, 1854-1900," *Great Plains Quarterly* 23 (Spring 2003): 115.

9. A. E. Touzalin, Burlington Land Commissioner, 1878, quoted in Richard C. Overton, *Burlington West: A Colonization History of the Burlington Railroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 433.

10. "Act of July 2, 1864," 13 U.S. *Statutes at Large*, 356, Sections 18, 19, and 20.

11. Frank N. Wilner, *Railroad Land Grants: Paid in Full* (Washington, DC: Association of American Railroads, 1981), 5; Lloyd J. Mercer, *Railroads and Land Grant Policy: A Study in Government Intervention* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 6-7. Seventy-seven percent of lands were granted to trans-continental lines, 15 percent to regional roads, and 8 percent to Reconstruction railroads in the South.

12. See *Map of the State of Nebraska Showing the Lands of the Burlington & Missouri Riv. R.R. Co. in Nebraska* (New York: G. W. & C. B. Colton & Co., 1876).

13. For a general discussion, see Richard C. Overton, *Burlington Route: A History to the Burlington Lines* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 100-104; Leslie E. Decker, *Railroads, Lands, and Politics: The Taxation of Railroad Land Grants, 1864-1897* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1964), 189; Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 76, 161; and Karrie L. Dvorak, "We Are All Fat and Hearty: Remembrances and Commentary of Early Homesteading in Nebraska from the Oblinger Family Letters, 1872-73" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2006), 10.

The area of Nebraska is about 50 million acres. The Burlington land grant amounted to over 3,828 sections (square miles) of land. Contracts executed by railroad land offices were second only to five-year claims made under the Homestead Act of 1862—the state had more land taken under this act than any other state in the Union.

14. "Iowa and Nebraska Lands for Sale"; Overton, *Burlington West*, 323, 449; Overton, *Burlington Route*, 100-104, 166-67; Decker, *Railroads, Lands, and Politics*, 189.

15. Clifton Clyde Jones, "The Agricultural Development Program of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1954), 35. See also *Western Agriculture and the Burlington* (Chicago: Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, 1934), 7-8.

16. "Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company in Nebraska: Premiums for Land Improvements."

17. "Iowa and Nebraska Lands for Sale." For a discussion on markets, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

18. W. W. Baldwin, *Corporate History of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company and Affiliated Companies (As of date June 30, 1917)* (Chicago, 1921), 319-23, 344-47, 349-55; W. W. Baldwin, *Chicago, Lines West of the Missouri River*, vol. 3 of *Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company: Documentary History* (Chicago, 1929), 1-58, 184-88, 242-45; *Map of the Union and Central Pacific Railroad* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1882). Also available at <http://www.ccpr.org/Museum/Maps>.

19. Ibid.

20. Overton, *Burlington West*, 369, 449; Overton, *Burlington Route*, 100-104; Helen Marie Anderson, "The Influence of Railway Advertising upon the Settlement of Nebraska" (master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1926), 44.

21. Under this arrangement, even-numbered sections were distributed by the Government Land Office, usually according to terms of the Homestead Act, and odd-numbered sections were sold by the Burlington Land Office, oftentimes after all the free land was taken first.

22. Aidan McQuillan, "European Americans," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart, 219; see also John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 177.

23. Anderson, "Germans," 233-34.

24. Steven James Bellovich, "A Geographic Appraisal of Settlement within the Union Pacific Land Grant in Eastern Nebraska, 1869-1890" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 1974), 152.

25. The Freeman Homestead is in Gage County—the county just south of Lancaster. It was the first homestead claimed under the Homestead Act of 1862. For more information and photographs, see National Parks Service, "Homestead National Monument," <http://www.nps.home>.

26. See, for example, McFarland, *B & M Land Sales in Nebraska*.

27. "Letter from Willard Grant to George P. Cather," no date, *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*. See also "Letter from N. T. Waters to George P. Cather," October 23, 1878, *ibid*.

28. Burlington Land Commissioner, B. & M. R. *Land in Nebraska*, German language edition, trans. Kurt E. Kinbacher (Lincoln: *Nebraska Staats-Anzeigers*, 1882), unpaginated. Full translation available on *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*. For background, see also Laura A. Detre, "Canada's Campaign for Immigrants and the Images

of Canada West Magazine," *Great Plains Quarterly* 24 (Spring 2004): 115-16.

29. B. & M. R. *Land in Nebraska*, German Language edition. For a discussion of ethnicity, see Raymond Douglas Screws, "Retaining Their Culture and Ethnic Identity: Assimilation among Czechs and Swedes in Saunders County, Nebraska, 1880-1910" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003), 107.

30. McQuillan, "European Americans," 219.

31. MacFarland, *B & M Lands in Nebraska*.

32. B. & M. R. *Land in Nebraska*, German language edition.

33. Ibid.

34. These were Township 7, Range 5E; Township 8, Range 5E; Township 7, Range 6E; Township 8, Range 6E.

35. Anderson, "Germans," 233-34.

36. B. & M. R. *Land in Nebraska*, German language edition.

37. Burlington Land Sales Database.

38. U.S. Census, Geostat Center: Collections, University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

39. Lynn Township is Township 7, Range 7W. Of the 106 Burlington claims, forty-one were executed by people from Ohio, sixteen by migrants from Illinois, and thirty-seven by various immigrant groups.

40. Burlington Land Sales Database.

41. See Burlington Land Contracts, 3898 through 3920, Burlington Land Sales Data Base, *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*. Grossshans sometimes appears as Grossshaus or Grosshand in census reports and scholarly discussions.

42. James Ruben Griess, *The German-Russian: Those Who Came to Sutton* (Hastings, NE, 1968), 102-3. These families included the surnames Nuss and Hoffman.

43. Bradley H. Baltensperger, "Agricultural Change among Great Plains Russian Germans," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73, no. 1 (1983): 77.

44. Overton, *Burlington West*, 299, 342; McQuillan, "European Americans," 219.

45. "Iowa and Nebraska Lands for Sale."

46. See especially the high mobility through Kansas in 1860-1870, in White, "It's Your Misfortune," 147.

47. See Burlington Land Contracts numbers 5283, 5963, 5120, and 8962, *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*; Burlington Land Sales Database.

48. See Burlington Land Contracts numbers 8314 and 8800, *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*; Burlington Land Sales Database.