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# U.S. Military Maps and Survey Notes Correct 1856 LDS Emigration Misrepresentations

*Don H. Smith*

In 1856, a crew surveying a new military road across eastern Nebraska left two maps, a diary, and three survey books that clear up misconceptions about the route traveled and the conditions encountered by the LDS handcart emigrants of the same year. The need for the new road arose as hostility between Indians and emigrants multiplied with increased western migration. The natives soon realized that their way of life was threatened by encroachment on their lands and destruction of their resources. Their alarm was heightened by the invasion of contagious diseases for which they had no immunity or cure. The idea of placing military outposts along the Oregon Trail to monitor the Indians and to help ensure safe passage for the emigrants began in 1844 but was enhanced by the Whitman massacre of 1847. Continual supplies were needed to maintain these military installations, but the roads leading to them were primitive. Earlier military outposts were placed along navigable streams where supplies were readily available, but the geology of the Platte River made it useless for navigation. The water in that stream has been described as “too thin to plow and too thick to drink.”<sup>1</sup>

To improve transportation to and from the inland military bases, Congress appropriated \$50,000 for the construction of a road between Omaha and New

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Fort Kearney, Nebraska. In the summer of 1856, a crew was sent out to choose the route for this road and to make the preliminary survey for its construction. The task was assigned to Army engineers, who first examined the trail currently used by emigrants with the idea of improving it. Their outward course followed closely the tracks left by a Mormon wagon train that was captained by Knud Petersen. The engineering party, containing five wagons and twelve riding horses, left Omaha on 1 July, three days after Petersen's train departed from Florence, Nebraska. Captain John H. Dickerson, the officer in charge of the engineers, identified the location of their course of travel thus: "I crossed Big and Little Papillon on what is known as 'Winter Quarters trail,' the route usually pursued by Mormon emigrants. . . . From the crossing of the Little Papillon I pursued very nearly the route over which the Mormon and California emigrants have been passing for several years."<sup>2</sup>

The engineers made a reconnaissance and cursory survey of the emigrants' road with a compass and odometer, making notes of their findings. As further evidence that they followed on the heels of the Mormon wagon train, one finds this entry in Dickerson's diary: "A Mormon train of 54 wagons is two days in advance of us. Our camp today is on their camping ground." Additional statements among the engineers' survey notes ensure that they stayed on that course: "The Mormon Pass, Track of Mormon train, A Mormon train took a road ascending the hill at this point, Mormon Bridge, In the Mormon Road, and Met Mormon Handcart train." Further identifying the engineers' route, Dickerson's report stated, "A ferry has been established on it [the Loup Fork River] near its mouth to facilitate the Mormon emigration."<sup>3</sup>

From the above comments, the fact that the military survey crew followed closely the 1856 Mormon route across Nebraska has been established. Let us now examine the effects of their findings on the recorded histories of the 1856 and later Mormon emigrations. So these findings can be expressed in the most advantageous way, data from the nineteenth century maps and survey notes have been transferred to more current charts. This has been done with the aid of copies of two military maps, survey notes, contour maps, military reports, newspaper articles, handcart company journals, and the original United States Geological Survey of Nebraska. The approximate locations of the 1856 military route and handcart trail have been drawn on current county maps. A copy of one of the original military maps has been attached for visual comparison. So we can demonstrate the utility of this reconstructed map, the approximate locations of the Willie Handcart Company campsites have been plotted along its 1856 course of travel together with known landmarks, settlements, river crossings, and land claims.<sup>4</sup>

When the above described map is in hand, the stage is now set to pursue the goals of this paper—namely, to correct misrepresentations about the 1856 emigration and to provide a travel guide for the descendants of those pioneers who wish to retrace their predecessors' journey. For the first time, it is now possible

to tie journal entries to the mapped portion of the handcart trail and to relate the events of each day to the land on which they took place.

If someone were to try to relate those daily events to the map found in the publication *Handcarts to Zion*, pages 50–51, purported to be the single location of the handcart trail between 1856–1860, he or she would encounter a difficult task. The authors of this book must be applauded for their great work; but their map, even though general in nature, gives misconceptions about the emigrants' course of travel. The authors left out major parts of the trail utilized by the largest number of handcart emigrants, those of 1856, and misrepresent other sections of the route. Their map shows neither a river crossing near Columbus nor the initial part of the trail up the south side of the Loup Fork River. It also shows Fort Kearney to be miles away from their path, whereas the 1856 emigrants could see signs of the post along their route. The fort was located one mile south of the river. Their map also makes no accommodation for the last two handcart companies of 1856, containing about a thousand emigrants who crossed the North Platte River and traveled up its south side.

Equally difficult would be a similar exercise employing the maps found in *Mormon Trails in Nebraska* prepared by the Nebraska Mormon Trails Association for the sesquicentennial celebration of the first pioneer trek to Utah. That organization also left out the river crossing at Columbus and the initial part of the trail up the Loup Fork. (How could the descendants of Henry Walker know where he was killed by lightning and buried without this part of the trail map?) The section of the handcart route that followed Prairie Creek for twenty miles is also missing on their maps. (This is an important omission because the Indian attack on Babbitt's Wagon Train took place in this region. The story of this train is an integral part of the saga that eventually culminated in the death of Almon Babbitt, Utah's Secretary of State.) A note at the beginning of the Nebraska Mormon Trails Association's map collection states: "The most commonly used secondary source was a masters thesis by Ogla Sharp Steel entitled '*Geography of the Mormon Trail Across Nebraska . . . the single best study on the subject.*'" Perhaps this explains the omission of the handcart trail from the Association's publication because Steel left this Mormon trail out of her study. Neither the military maps nor Captain Dickerson's report were cited in her 1933 thesis. She also reported that the Loup Fork ferry did not begin operation until 1858 and was started at the request of the U.S. Army engineers who surveyed the 1856 road. There were, however, ferries operating near present-day Columbus as early as 1850, 1852, and 1853.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier handcart emigration accounts, such as Solomon F. Kimball's "Belated Emigrants of 1856," *Improvement Era*, vol. 17, 1913–1914, have adapted the sketch made by Lee Green Richards to represent the 1856 handcart trail. This drawing, which in earlier generations hung on a wall in the majority of LDS chapels in the western United States, was designed to show the route of the Mormon emigrations of 1846–47 from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. Richards'

sketch shows a path that deviated greatly from the handcart trail. The assumption that there was but one route from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City is at variance with fact because not all of the earlier emigrants followed the same pathway. Even the Pioneer Company under Brigham Young's leadership did not return to Winter Quarters on exactly the same track that was followed on its outward journey. In a more recent article, "Weather, Disaster, and Responsibility: An Essay on the Willie and Martin Handcart Story," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997-1998):16, the author repeats Kimball's pattern by proclaiming: "The route taken by the 1856 handcart companies was little different than that taken by the first Mormon wagon company in 1847." No explanation is given for his conclusion, but a comparison between the military maps and Steel's maps shows there is considerable difference between the two routes.<sup>6</sup>

The 1856 Mormon journals pay little attention to the developments that were underway between Florence and the Loup Fork ferry and leave us with the impression that the entire region was a wilderness occupied solely by Indians and wild animals. Perhaps the emigrants' zeal to proceed to their land of Zion and the drudgeries of their daily routine made them oblivious to the happenings around them, or perhaps they were simply too tired at the end of the day to write anything except the bare essentials. As the winter weather of 1856 broke and spring arrived, the country was alive with movement. Rail traffic was brisk, revenues were up, and river boats were crowded. There was a westward movement of an estimated two thousand people a day on eastern rail lines alone. When southern lines are included, the figure jumps to four thousand. Antislavery forces were coming from the North and proslavery forces from the South, fomenting the crisis that would determine whether Kansas would be slave or free. One hundred thousand people were expected to arrive in Kansas alone, which did not include the thousands who were headed for western Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota. From the single community of Lowell, Massachusetts, an average of fifty tickets were sold each week to emigrants moving west. Horace Greeley's words to his eastern readers, "Go west young man, go west," were being heard loudly and clearly.<sup>7</sup>

The contents of any single 1856 handcart journal add little to the picture of the route across Nebraska, but when descriptions are extracted from the entire group of journals, a scene begins to develop. By adding military data, supplemented by concurrent newspaper accounts and local historical information, we get a more complete view of the trail; and its surroundings emerge. Caution must, however, be exercised about the accuracy of flowery newspaper descriptions because they may have been written as inducements to settlers.

The emigrant journals suggest that the reoutfitting campground at Florence lay at the edge of the city, on the north side of Mill Creek. The road west led from the campground across a bridge, spanning the creek, through the city, and ascended the hill past the Winter Quarters grave site. Five to seven yoke of oxen were required to draw the wagons, loaded with four thousand pounds, up this

hill. The road continued over the crest of the ridge and descended to Summer Quarters or Cutler's Park, which lay two and one-half to three miles west of the campground. This new campsite left the Missouri River in view and provided good forage for the cattle, a sufficient supply of wood, found on either side of the road, and a clear stream of running water. At least two children entered the world here. Sarah Ann Ashton was born on the night of 26 August and was assigned the name of her mother, who died giving Sarah birth. The next morning, Alpha Loader Jaques made his debut.<sup>8</sup>

Three miles beyond Cutler's Park lay the Little Pappaea or Little Papillion, which served as a campground for most of the handcart companies. By the time this creek was reached, nearby settlements had faded away; and the emigrants were in the wilderness. The water in the creek was of good quality, the grass was plentiful, and the terrain adjacent to it was made up of rolling hills that contained a few wooded areas. The soil in the region was exceptional in quality, was rich in humus, clay, and lime, and produced a variety of excellent grasses; it was ideal for raising wheat. Three miles farther led the emigrants to the Big Pappaea or Big Papillion, which was similar to its little sister in character.<sup>9</sup>

The military report adds:

The two Papillon creeks are small streams with high banks, but, excepting for a short time after a freshet, there is very little water in them, the supply being mostly from springs issuing from their banks. On the Papillons there are a few scattering cottonwood trees and willow bushes. . . . Between the Missouri and Elkhorn rivers the country is a high, rolling prairie, elevated three hundred feet above the Missouri river, and is very much broken by ravines, which attain a depth of from thirty to one hundred feet below the general level. . . . The high prairie . . . has a rich, light soil, but much of it is so broken that it cannot be cultivated. . . . [and] the country is so broken that it (the road) necessarily follows the dividing ridges. The ravines putting into the Elkhorn, the two Pappillons and the Missouri, are numerous, and interlock at their heads, making this a very circuitous route."<sup>10</sup>

A fifteen- to eighteen-mile journey from the Little Pappaea led to the Elkhorn River that was moorage for an old, flat-topped ferry boat. At the ferry was a trading post that had been established to supply travelers with useful and essential items. The presence of a band of Indians at the ferry was noted by one emigrant, but no mention was made of the presence of a number of settlers. Yet we know their paths crossed from an entry in one of the settler's diaries. The western bank of the river was steep enough to stall the teams as they attempted to draw the heavy wagons from the ferry up the hill. All hands, men and women, were sometimes needed to prevent disaster by helping to push and pull the wagons to the top of the bank. The cattle were not given the luxury to ride across the stream but were forced to swim.<sup>11</sup>

Not mentioned by the handcarters but placed on the engineers' map was Elkhorn City, now called Elk City, which was located on the high ground above the river. The emigrants passed through this community, incorporated by an act

of the legislature on 22 January 1856, which contained a hotel and other buildings in the process of construction. The surrounding region was rapidly filling up with settlers who were busy plowing and improving their land claims. The 1856 Nebraska census takers found 119 people in the Elkhorn precinct; however, some were temporary residents.<sup>12</sup>

On their outbound course (3 July), the surveyors noted:

[The] Elkhorn river has an average width of about two hundred feet. It is surprisingly tortuous, with a rapid current, sandy bed, and low, sandy banks, which overflow and are subject to great changes. Very considerable annual alterations of its bed are evident. On the east side it runs near and in places washes the bluff; on the west the valley of the Platte borders on it for thirty miles above its mouth. . . . On the eastern side . . . the approach to the valley from the high ground is very good in its natural condition, and the bank is high and relatively quite permanent. . . . Along the Elkhorn there is a continuous growth of cotton wood, occasionally interspersed with oak, black walnut, and elm.

On their return journey (8 August), the engineers observed many changes. "Another town in opposition to Elk Horn City has been started since we were here. A steam saw mill is being put up on this later town site and a bright future . . . fleecing [the] uninitiated is anticipated by the proprietor. . . . The land is being taken up rapidly by pre-emption claims, a few miles out and for several miles either side of the ferry."<sup>13</sup>

To add color to the above report, one might attach a settler's observation from the eastern high ground above the Elkhorn:

When in the early autumn of 1856, from the bluffs near Elkhorn City, my eye first beheld this portion of the great Platte Valley, I thought I had never seen so goodly a landscape. For many miles the wanderings of the Elkhorn and Platte rivers were outlined by a fringe of timber, bounding the valley on either side, while the meanderings of the now classic Rawhide Creek were distinctly traceable by an occasional tree and clump of bushes. The sight filled me with rapture and made the blood fairly bound within my veins. In all my life I had never seen its like before, and I never expect to again. Here this grand and beautiful and fertile country spread out like a map at my feet. And what made it more fascinating was the fact that it was unoccupied except by Indians and wild beasts.<sup>14</sup>

A two- to three-mile journey from the Elkhorn, over mostly sandy roads, led to Rawhide Creek, which appeared to be a more favorable camp site than the bank of the former stream. Good grazing, good water, and high grass were found there. (A copy of the surveyor's drawing of the Rawhide Creek region is located to the left of the map's legend.) Some points on the survey were not definitely defined because of difficulties encountered, such as the high grass found on the approach to Rawhide Creek. The grass reached Captain Dickerson's shoulder while he was riding his horse through it, and the ears of a frightened deer were all that could be seen as it bounced away. It was recommended that the road-

construction crew arrive early before the grass became so high that the best route could not easily be discernable. This region often became impassible after heavy rain showers because of the “Miry soil west of the Elkhorn river for several miles, and to the overflow of the Rawhide and other small streams.”<sup>15</sup>

A twelve- to thirteen-mile journey, along a reasonably good road, led to the Liberty Pole camping ground that was located close to the Platte River where it made its turn westward. No water was available on this course, and the Platte provided a joyful sight to the emigrants when it came into view. This region was described as a flat plain, similar to the Danish island of Amager, several miles wide, through which the Platte River has its course. Toward the south and the north, the terrain was made up of rolling hills.<sup>16</sup>

The military’s description of this same area was recorded thus:

West of the Elkhorn the Platte valley is entered. This valley is from, five to twelve miles wide and is boarded on either side by well defined bluffs. . . . The Platte river is from a half to three miles wide. The channels are filled from the mouth up with islands, many of which are large. The river is seldom confined to a single channel, but in many places it has as many as eight or ten. . . . The average depth of water does not exceed two feet, and the range between high and low water mark, owing to the width of the stream and rapidity of the current, is small—probably not exceeding three feet. . . . A luxuriant growth of nutritious grass prevails throughout the Platte country, which will afford good grazing during the summer and allow the husbandman to provide a supply of hay for winter uses. . . . The Platte generally has timber along its banks. On the islands, and where it is protected by bayous and sloughs from the prairie fires, it is heavy.

Dickerson’s diary adds: “The trail strikes the river [Platte] 11 miles distant from the Elk Horn crossing and near the most northerly point between Omaha and Fort Kearney.”<sup>17</sup>

From the north corner of the Platte, the road moved away from the river; but because of its proximity to the stream, the route was very sandy, which made pulling difficult for both humans and draft animals. The grass along the road was high and wet with dew in the early morning hours, which added to the discomfort of the sandy roads. The lack of variety in the scenery made the view monotonous to some of the travelers. As the Platte meandered through the valley in its snake-like pattern, its banks, on occasion, neared the road, at which places the cattle were watered and the companies camped. However, the fickle river did not always accommodate the migrants with convenient bends, and the distances traveled sometimes forced them to camp waterless, away from its banks.<sup>18</sup>

The surveyors did not view this section of the road in the same way as the emigrants. “This portion of the territory is fast settling up with an industrious and enterprising class of pioneers. Pre-emption claims have already been located on all the timbered lands along the water courses as far west as the Loup Fork.” The survey maps show several platted communities and land claims that were already in place by the time the handcart companies arrived on the scene.

Contemporary newspaper accounts give added information about these settlements and claims. In the region between the Elkhorn River and Shell Creek, eleven families were counted along the road by the first part of July. This number did not include the initial settlers of Fremont who drove their first stakes 23 August, two days after the Willie Company left the area, and finalized the boundaries of the town site three days later, four days before the Martin Company arrived there. The Army engineers did not place this town site on their map because their survey was completed 14 August. The region about North Bend, which lies between the two mentioned streams, received its first settlers 4 July, and the town was laid out between the engineers' outward journey 6 July and their return 6 August. At the request of one of its citizens, the course of the road was altered slightly to accommodate the town's plat and was routed along River Street where the grass stood at least four feet high. In North Bend's census domain were twenty- three people, which did not include twenty others scattered along the Platte. Some of the community's early settlers intended to plant their roots in Kansas; but because of war-like conditions found along its borders, they were advised to seek a different route that led them along the Platte. Neither these communities nor the land claims between them were noted in the handcart journals. However, a settlement was mentioned by one journalist near a camp site, five or six miles beyond North Bend, which was probably Emerson that was laid out as a town on paper but never developed beyond that stage. Some of the settlers of this region waited to begin the construction of their cabins until they were assured by Dickerson where the road would be located.<sup>19</sup>

Although Shell Creek was listed as a stopping place or campground by most journalists, only one gave any indication of the presence of a settlement by mentioning purchases made from Isaac Albertson. They noted that the road was less sandy than the path of the day before but made no further appraisal. From the surveyors and other sources, we learn that just north of Shell Creek's junction with the Platte River, the town site of Buchanan was laid out 27 April 1856 as the county seat of Platte County but, by 5 August , contained only one log hut. Isaac Albertson, one of Buchanan's founders, established a store on his land claim, which was located just north of the creek crossing. (The map insert, above this proposed settlement, provides the viewer with a picture of Albertson's holdings as recorded by the engineers in their survey book.) Although Shell Creek was a small stream, it required bridging because of its depth, and a toll bridge served the purpose. The emigrants made no mention of this bridge because the payment for its use appears to have been arranged in advance, and it presented no impediment to their progress. The Buchanan site was claimed to be one of the best in the region because Shell Creek offered water power and nearby timber made it an ideal spot for a lumber mill. Crops had been planted, and the seventeen residents of the area were busy preparing shelter for the com-



ing winter.<sup>20</sup>

The road worked its way southward following the Shell Creek crossing and headed toward the next bend in the Platte. The trail across this section was good except for about a five-mile sandy stretch. The constant change in the course of the river left a large lake, isolated from the main stream, which provided the emigrants with an adequate camping spot. Some handcarters were forced to camp before reaching the river or the lake and were too tired to raise their tents. Although they had no fuel to burn, they saw the prairies aglow with fire in two places.<sup>21</sup>

Dickerson's diary description follows very closely those given in the handcart journals. "After crossing the [Shell] creek made a turn to the south of our direction to avoid a low piece of ground. The curve is gentle and the road apparently leads along the former bank of the river though it is some three miles from it now, encamped four and a half miles from Shell Creek in the open prairie getting our water in a long pond in the former bed of the stream." The mapped course for the military road varied from the emigrant trail at this juncture as indicated: "The present course bends to the north of our course to avoid an old river channel . . . [and] the bottom is a good deal marked with sloughs, which cannot be avoided." The variation in the course between the two roads was not huge because the surveyors, on their return journey, encountered the Bunker Handcart Company traveling along the old track. Dickerson described their 5 August meeting thus:

Soon after starting we met a Mormon hand cart train. There were 3 ox and one mule team to the whole party consisting of some 200 persons. These wagons are only used for the sick. Old decrepit men walking with a cane in each hand some blind [Thomas D. Gillis] and some who had suffered the loss of a limb [Thomas David Evans] were all winding their way together like pilgrims to the Temple of Mecca. Old women and small children all showing signs of weariness were trooping along by the sides of the carts which were generally drawn by the men but occasionally by the women. The young babes were being carried by their mothers. All together they were about as miserable a set of working devils as ever set out on a pilgrimage. . . . They have come from Iowa City 280 miles from Council Bluffs traveling the entire distance in this manner and intend to go on to Utah this summer and fall. They travel from 12 to 20 miles a day.<sup>22</sup>

Little attention was paid by the emigrants to the settlement activities that were occurring in the neighborhood of the Loup Fork ferry. Only three incidental entries give any indication that there were people in the region. "Camped again on the Loup Fork past some houses, some corn growing by them; An immense cloud of grasshoppers was seen here today. The people was quite alarmed in consequence thereof, it being rare for such to be seen in this part; Stopped at Turkey Grove a while, and then went on to the Ferry 2 miles further." Newspaper reporters fill in settlement details the emigrants left out:

Four miles above the mouth of Loup Fork the town of Columbus is situated. Here the emigrant road and new military road from Omaha City to Fort Kearney crosses the river at a good and safe ferry. This is, at present, the pioneer town of the Platte Valley, the most westerly from the Missouri river, and is already a prominent place. There is a tavern and a small store. Several other buildings are under construction, and some of the proprietors live here, and are at present engaged in putting up their houses.

The town's location was marked in April and laid out 28 May. By September, more improvements were observed in Columbus than found in many towns that had been laid out two years earlier. At the same time, or perhaps beforehand, in neighboring Pawnee City, the Elkhorn and Loup Fork Bridge and Ferry Company, with whom the outfitters had contracted for the passage of the Mormon emigrating companies, was busy making improvements in its operation. The company was in the process of building a two-story hotel that measured forty by twenty feet, with accompanying stables, corral, and other accommodations for the travelers. (This appears to be the same building that was later called *Cleveland House*, as mentioned by Steel.) Fifteen men were employed by the company at that place. Later, the two competing groups, the ferry company and the town company, joined forces and together had twenty-seven men busily working in and about the community. (The census gives the number of residents as nineteen.)<sup>23</sup>

As each handcart company arrived at the ferry, the state of the river bed had to be assessed because it was constantly changing. When the water level in the river dropped and sandbars began to appear, channels had to be found that were deep enough to float the boat. Birch, the ferryman, went out in the stream in his canoe to locate these open stretches. With the aid of forty or fifty emigrants pulling, pushing, and guiding the boat, the company's wagons, carts, women, and children were ferried across. This process was not without its risks because when the men reached a deep hole, all tried to climb aboard the boat; some succeeded, but others tumbled in and were forced to swim. Few escaped without sinking up to their necks in the muddy water. (An earlier emigrant described the water in this section of the river "as muddy as a hog wallow.") The draft animals were compelled to swim across the stream, which required a great deal of effort on the part of the handcarters. An experienced leader sometimes climbed on the back of the lead ox to direct and encourage him while others were at the rear of the herd driving the oxen forward.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Mormon emigrants paid little attention to the settlements along the Loup Fork and Platte Rivers, their outfitters, stationed in Florence, were certainly aware of these developments. They had been negotiating with the proprietors of the Elkhorn and Loup Fork Bridge and Ferry Company since early spring for the passage of the Mormon emigrants over their system. They also kept careful watch on the happenings that were taking place in Washington,

D.C., regarding which lands were opening up for settlement. These men had been instructed by Brigham Young, through John Taylor, to make a Mormon settlement on Wood River or elsewhere in the region as a resupply station for Mormon emigrants going west. They were in constant communication with John Taylor in New York and he with John M. Bernheisel, Utah's representative in Washington. When Erastus Snow returned to St. Louis from Utah as the Mormon leader in the midsection of the United States, he acted as coordinator for this project. One of the outfitters, Andrew Cunningham, led a small group from Florence on 6 November up the north side of the Loup Fork to the Beaver River region, made some large land claims, and returned nine days later. When spring arrived, Cunningham and seventeen others left Florence on 22 April 1857; and five days later, they laid out a five-hundred-acre farm and named their settlement Genoa. This small group was later joined by a party of Saints from St. Louis. By 9 June, a hundred men were on the ground, great improvements had been made, some of the crops were in, and some were already up. Assisting in the misrepresentation of the character of the 1856 handcart route is a quote relating to this Genoa settlement found in the *Encyclopedic History of the Church*, page 277: "At the time Genoa was founded in the Spring of 1857, there was only one house between Florence, on the Missouri River and the New Settlement, and that lonely house, located on the Elkhorn River, belonged to an Indian trader." This myth has been perpetuated by Daughters of the Utah Pioneers' publications that have also added confusing accounts about the origin the Genoa community.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the character of the Loup Fork, the engineers reported:

This is a wide, shallow stream, with a rapid current and low sandy banks, which, however, do not appear to be inundated during freshets. I had no means of examining its bed to a depth exceeding twelve feet, but to that depth, and I have no doubt much greater, it is quicksand. . . . There are strata three or four feet apart, differing somewhat in firmness; but is all a loose sand, and the specific gravity of which is but a little greater than that of water and is ready to move with the slightest increase of current in which it has for the time become deposited. On account of this loose character of the soil the bed of the river has changed for miles in many places, and there is no permanency about its banks. These former beds are now miry sloughs, making the river inaccessible on the south side, where they occur more frequently than on the north. . . . Along the Loup Fork there are few good camping grounds. The valley, which is from three to five miles wide, is cut up with miry sloughs, forcing the road to keep near the foot of the bluff, where neither wood nor water can be conveniently procured.

Later in the report, Dickerson added a further description:

This river, Loup Fork, like all the shallow streams in this part of the country, has a light, miry, shifting, sandy bed, which during high water especially, is constantly changing, so that where it is most practicable to cross it with a ferry boat, one day

the boat grounds, the next, in the middle of the stream; compelling the discharge of loads into wagons, brought there across channels from the opposite shore, as shifting and difficult as those first crossed. And it is impracticable for wagons or teams to stand still, even a short time, anywhere in the river, without miring in quicksand, the difficulties and labors and losses by emigrants, are very great. . . . The river averages in width, for twenty miles above its mouth, which embraces its principle crossing, about one thousand feet, with a depth ranging from six inches to six and eight feet. . . . A ferry has been established . . . to facilitate the Mormon emigration, but sand bars originate rapidly, and interrupt the crossing. In going to Fort Karney the ferry was good, but on returning, twenty-five days afterwards, sand bars had formed, and the wagon train was gotten over by the men wading by the side of the boat, winding about among the bars, hunting out the deepest water. . . . The timber of the Loup Fork resembles that of the Platte.<sup>26</sup>

Dickerson's diary gives further information about the ferry and its surroundings. On their outward journey, the engineering party camped, 8 July, two miles below the ferry to avoid contact with Petersen's train that was crossing the river on that day. Dickerson took time to look around him and noted: "The settlers at the Loup Fork have laid out the town of Columbus in a magnificent scale."

When he returned to the ferry on 1 August, Dickerson recorded the changes that had occurred in his absence:

Two handcart trains on their way to the promised land and a returning California train had crossed since we went up. . . . We encamped at the ferry where we found a surveying party from Omaha laying out Columbus. Two towns had been laid out, one called Pawnee and the other settled by Germans from Columbus, Ohio called Columbus. The two companies had consolidated and the town now being laid out is the result. . . . At present there are only two log huts in their vicinity. One is occupied by the ferryman the other by the Germans. The Nebraska mania begins to manifest itself again, the Proprietors of the town are expecting a large emigration to it next spring.

(By the time the first handcart company of 1857 arrived in the region, there were ten houses in Fremont and eighteen in Columbus.)<sup>27</sup>

The Loup Fork's change of course and the sloughs left behind required the emigrants to stay away from the stream much of the time. This forced them to travel along sandy roads and sometimes over the bluffs that bordered the Loup Fork valley. At times, they had to go in excess of a mile to find wood and water and to feed their stock. Most of the journalists made mention of one particular steep, sandy hill that required the doubling of teams to climb. This hill was located a few miles west of the 1847 pioneer crossing, near present-day Genoa. (The best 1856 ford was reported to be three miles above the mouth of the Beaver River and may have been used by at least part of the 1847 emigration.) In one place, a sizable lake was left behind by the receding river, and its shore served as a camping place. But the immediate area was void of wood. The river

provided water for most of their domestic uses; but on one long sandy stretch, they had to rely on pools or wells for this valuable commodity. After passing through this difficult section, they discovered some springs about four miles from the upper crossing, which gave them a welcomed change. Earlier companies left notes for later companies to indicate where the best water supplies were located. There was generally adequate feed for the draft animals along the Loup Fork's long stretch in the form of grasses and wild pea vines, and the wood supply was similar to that of the Platte.<sup>28</sup>

The engineers made no mention of the presence of beaver on the Loup Fork, but a Mormon journalist described one of their dams that bridged this stream. It was apparently built during the fall and winter of 1856–57 near the upper crossing. The name *Beaver River*, attached to one of its tributaries, is evidence that the animals had been in the region at earlier times; and the pioneers of 1847 saw beaver in this stream. The fact that they bridged the main river has great significance because it reveals possible explanations for some of the changes that were seen along the stream's southern border. These animals may have constructed dams all along this river, the Platte, and other of the Platte's tributaries, which acted as catch basins for sediments and buffalo wastes. (Earlier emigrants verified the presence of isolated beaver dams on the upper reaches of the main Platte.) Such dams caused the water to spread out across the valley, extended the green areas, provided flood control, and protected trees from the annual fires that swept across these plains.

Steel mentioned an eighty-foot cottonwood tree located about two and one half miles southwest of Central City as one of the landmarks of the great trail. This is a questionable landmark on which to base a trail's location because there were no less than three lone trees along the 1856 emigrant course between the Loup Fork ferry and Wood River, and this excludes the one to which she refers. When the fur trappers caused the near extinction of the beaver from this region, their dams eventually failed because of a lack of maintenance; and the entire character of the area may have changed, including a reduction in water quality. As the river receded, the trees that once occupied safe havens were now exposed to prairie fires and disappeared, leaving only an isolated tree here and there as a reminder of the past.<sup>29</sup>

Near the Loup Fork's upper ford, the road turned south and followed along a creek bed that ran east of the present-day town of Palmer and veered westward after passing that community. In the soft ground that formed the headwaters of this creek, wagon ruts, left by heavy emigration, were found by those who made the initial survey of Nebraska. In this same region, about eight miles from the ford, wells were dug to supply water after the creek dried up early in the season. Each of the handcart companies stopped here to water animals and to rest after traveling over very sandy roads. The next major watering place lay to the south through a broken line of difficult sand hills where a slough or depression was dis-

covered off the road, near the present-day community of St. Libory. The third handcart company stopped here 10 August and appears to have left a note informing the fourth company of the presence of this water supply. The amount of water found in these depressions was dependent, to a large degree, on the thunderstorms that commonly visited these prairies. Lightning from one such storm killed one emigrant and injured others. The same storm dumped sufficient rain to leave a foot of water pooled in some of the lower parts of the road and surroundings. Added to the deep sand were the high winds that frequented this region and raised havoc with the emigrants' tents, sometimes rending or collapsing them. Although water was scarce, mosquitoes and lizards were abundant.<sup>30</sup>

Dickerson's diary has a similar ring that ensures the engineers were still in the Mormon track:

July 12 After going 8 miles up the bottom and just before leaving it there is permanent water in a slough by the road side. Here we watered and then started across the bluffs to the Platte. We found the upland very uneven and sandy. Wherever the surf has been broken the violent winds have blown it out in some places two feet deep giving it the appearance of an excavation. [This explains why Bermingham, see end-note 30, complained that the sand in some places was up to the hubs of the carts.] The loose sand is blown off the tracks. The road in most places is pretty good. After marching for thirteen miles we came to a pond which was about becoming dry but by sinking a well and collecting the water we got sufficient for one bucket to each animal.<sup>31</sup>

Prairie Creek was the next noted landmark, and its clear, running water was a welcome sight to the emigrants who had suffered two days with an inadequate water supply. The trail from the north, through regions of deep sand, reached the stream at its closest bend and then followed it for about three miles where the crossing was made. The creek's steep, sandy banks made its crossing a challenge and, following a heavy downpour, at times held the emigrants at bay until the water receded. Occasionally, driftwood was found along the stream; but most of the time, the emigrants depended upon buffalo chips for fuel.

From its mouth, the Platte valley was occupied by a variety of tall grasses; but the flora changed at the crossing of the Loup Fork where shorter varieties took their place. One of the journalists noted this difference by stating that grasses near Prairie Creek were short like English grass.

There is an indication that the 1856 route differed from that taken by earlier emigrations because leaders in the Willie and other companies who had crossed this region before were confused as to their location. Some thought they were at Wood River when they reached the next stream. This was Silver Creek that lay a few miles south and ran somewhat parallel to Prairie Creek. Their eventual location was, however, cleared up in other journals, newspapers, and a military report that pinpointed the location of an Omaha Indian encampment

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and the place where Babbitt's wagon train had been attacked by Cheyenne Indians. The Willie Company passed through the Omaha camp and stopped to rebury the uncovered remains of the wagoners who had been killed. The true route ran in a westerly direction between the two previously noted streams until it reached and once again followed Prairie Creek, which had, in the meantime, made a loop and changed its course southward. Wood was found along this second area of contact, and it served as the final resting place for Andrew Smith. The trail hugged the creek until it once again changed course to a westerly direction, near which point Babbitt's train had been attacked. Here the two-week-old, motherless infant, Sarah Ann Ashton, was buried among those felled by the Indians.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding this region, Dickerson's report reads:

I continued up the south side of the Loup Fork fifty-seven miles, when I left it, and, marching twenty-three miles across the range of high broken sand hills intervening between it and the Platte Valley, I struck Prairie creek. This creek meanders through the Platte bottoms for eighty miles. Where it is first met with after leaving the Loup Fork it is a pretty little stream, with clear, deep water and a rapid current, without trees, shrubs, or hills to indicate the presence of the watercourse. I continued up it twenty miles. Before leaving it, its banks became high, with a continuous short growth of ash and elm on their slopes. The volume of water is also greater here than it is lower down. Before reaching the Platte the water disappears for the greater part of the year, sinking in the quicksands, which prevail in this valley at a depth of from six to ten feet below the surface. . . . After leaving the Loup Fork there is an interval of thirty miles without water during the dry season, and forty miles without wood. The high country passed over is sandy and very broken, making the road heavy.<sup>33</sup>

From Prairie Creek, the emigrants headed toward the Platte only to find their course interrupted by two dry creek beds with steep banks. Some of the emigrants had to carry their handcars over one of these stream beds, which would have been extremely difficult had their load weighed the 600 pounds reported in the documentary *Trail of Hope* rather than their actual 150-pound combined weight. Near these creeks, which were tributaries of Wood River, was located one of the famed lone trees. About two miles farther led them to the Wood River, which they crossed on the Mormon Bridge. Such bridges consisted of two, three, or four logs laid across the stream with brush piled on top to a depth sufficient to offer the emigrants security against collapse from the weight of the wagons. This bridge did not apparently span the entire chasm because some of the emigrants had to unhitch the cattle from their supply wagons to negotiate this crossing and the previous one. The wagons were lowered down the steep banks with chains or ropes, using manpower and draft animals, atop the bank, as restraints, working together with locked wheels to slow the descent. When the wagon reached the bottom of the ravine, multiple teams on the other bank were attached to the chains, the wheels were unlocked, and the wagon was

pulled to the top. Wood River appears to have received its name because of the welcomed sight that the timber on its banks presented after days of cooking with buffalo chips. The trail followed up the banks of this river until it, too, changed course to a more northwesterly direction. Before leaving its appreciated environment and heading for the less-inviting Platte, the emigrants camped on its bank.<sup>34</sup>

Before he arrived at Fort Kearney, Dickerson described his findings relating to the final leg of his outward journey: "Leaving Prairie creek, I crossed Wood river. . . . For thirty miles its direction is nearly parallel to that of the Platte, and about five miles from it. Its banks are high, but gradually decrease towards its mouth, and these slopes are covered with a short growth of ash and elm. I kept up Wood river six miles, and then diverging to the left, again struck the Platte river near the head of Grand island." Dickerson's diary gives added details and some surprises:

July 14 Marched up Prairie Creek 6 miles and then turned nearly south and struck Wood River about 8 miles farther on. Crossed two deep small creeks. At Wood River which had been crossed by a Mormon emigrant train were traces of an old settlement. [The settlement to which he here refers appears to be what he later called Dr. Clark's hospital.] The stream is small but has high banks . . . [and we] continued up the river striking [it] from point to point for five miles. Since leaving or crossing Prairie Creek the first time the road has been over a very smooth level country, grass short and mostly buffalo [grass]. . . .

July 16 . . . For the last three days we had a Yankee Mormon preacher with us who has been up the river on both sides. He is one of the editors of the Mormon published in N.Y. He is traveling in a buck board with a Canadian pony and having gotten tired of the slow progress of an ox train determined to go through by himself. We used him for a guide. . . . Our Yankee friend left us and crossed over to some wagons we discovered on the other side of the stream.

Can there be any question as to whether the surveyors kept to the Mormon route to the very end of their outbound survey?<sup>35</sup>

Who was this unnamed Mormon? Alexander Robbins, counselor to John Taylor in the Eastern States Mission and former president of the St. Louis Conference, answers the description. He was indeed a Yankee, an 1841 resident of West Brewster, Massachusetts. Because of his experience as a grocer and Church executive in St. Louis, he was sent back to that city as one of the outfitters of the 1856 emigration. When his assignment was completed, he appears to have accompanied the John Banks' wagon train on his return trip to Utah, to which he had immigrated in 1851. He may have left that train before its 10 July arrival on the Elkhorn. Apparently, he reached Utah before the European Mission presidency because they made no mention of him in their report and certainly would have done so. He was already showing signs of discontentment with the Church, and he left Utah the following year on the guise of visiting his wife's relatives in the East.<sup>36</sup>

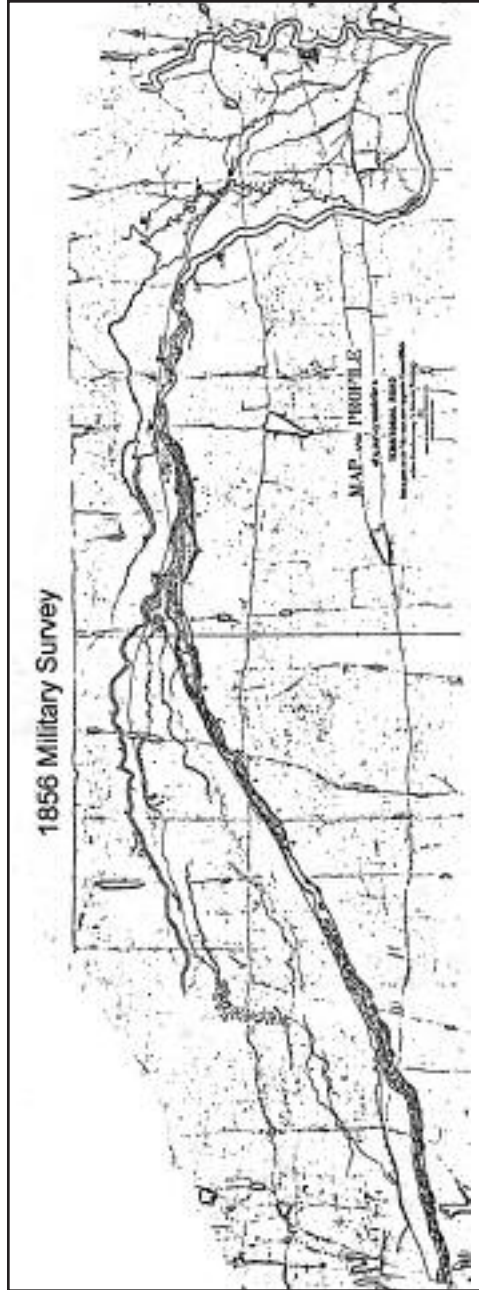


The difficulties encountered during the initial survey caused Captain Dickerson to consider an alternative route to that of the emigrant trail between the Loup Fork and the Platte Rivers:

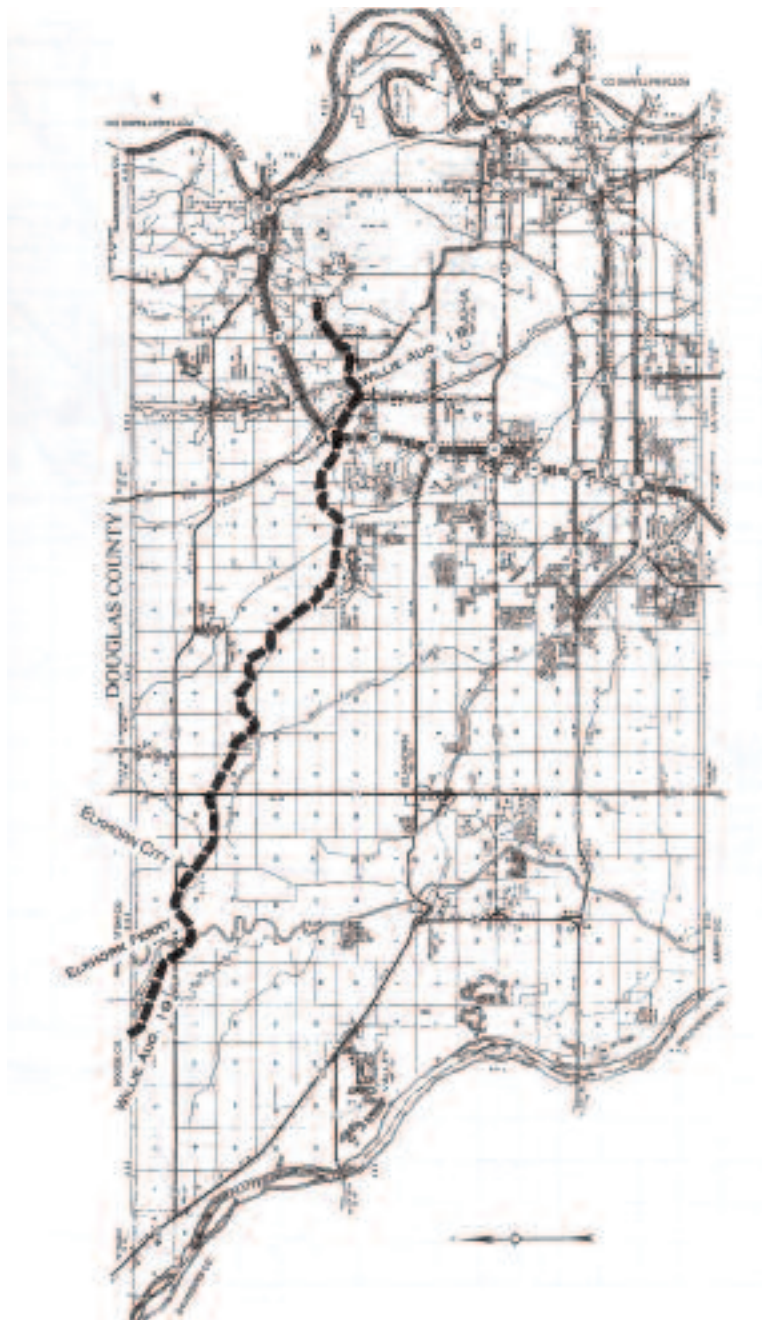
From information obtained from the interpreter at the fort, who had lived many years among the Pawnee Indians, and from the Pawnees themselves, who inhabit the country through which the road is to pass, and who were encamped near the fort, I was satisfied a shorter route could be obtained by going down the Platte. The information was vague and indefinite, but I determined to examine the route before making a location. . . . [We] struck our outward trail in the valley of the Loup Fork, four miles above where I had crossed it in going up. To this point the Platte river line is twenty-six miles shorter than the other, and is superior to it in every respect. It affords good points for camping grounds, from five to fifteen miles apart, with an abundance of wood, water, and grass; and the necessity for bridging Wood river and Prairie creek is obviated.<sup>37</sup>

Assuming the information that Captain Dickerson obtained from local sources, in and near Fort Kearney, was credible, he proceeded to survey his return course down the Platte River in a more accurate way by using a transit, level, and chain. The route was marked with stakes that were reportedly driven at eight chain intervals, or 528 feet apart. They were sighted by John Oakley, and a note was placed in his journal regarding them: "August 2 . . . here [along the Wood River] we found two rows of stakes for several miles, seemed to be put down with accuracy, some 5 rods [82.5 feet] apart." The distance cited by Oakley must have been the distance between the two rows of stakes.<sup>38</sup>

Upon weighing the results of both surveys, the engineers decided to abandon the idea of using the emigrant route between the Loup Fork and the Platte as the path of their new road. The meager water and fuel supplies found on the emigrant trail appear to have been a major consideration in their selection of a different course of travel that followed the north bank of the Platte River to its confluence with the Loup Fork River. Their proposed new route did not, however, give the travelers the early access to buffalo, a welcome addition to their food supplies, that the current trail provided and the old trail continued to be used. Although the engineers did not utilize their outward-bound survey in the construction of the new road, they included it on their maps. We are fortunate for this inclusion because that portion of their survey plots the course of the handcart emigration of 1856 that has, heretofore, been misrepresented by historians. The journals kept by the handcart pioneers give a much clearer picture when correlated with the surveyors' maps, their accompanying survey notes, their reports, and Dickerson's diary than without them. John Oakley's journal entry about the double row of stakes would forever remain a mystery without the survey materials; and the general location of the graves of Andrew Smith, Babbitt's teamsters, and the infant, Sarah Ann Ashton, would be left unknown.<sup>39</sup>



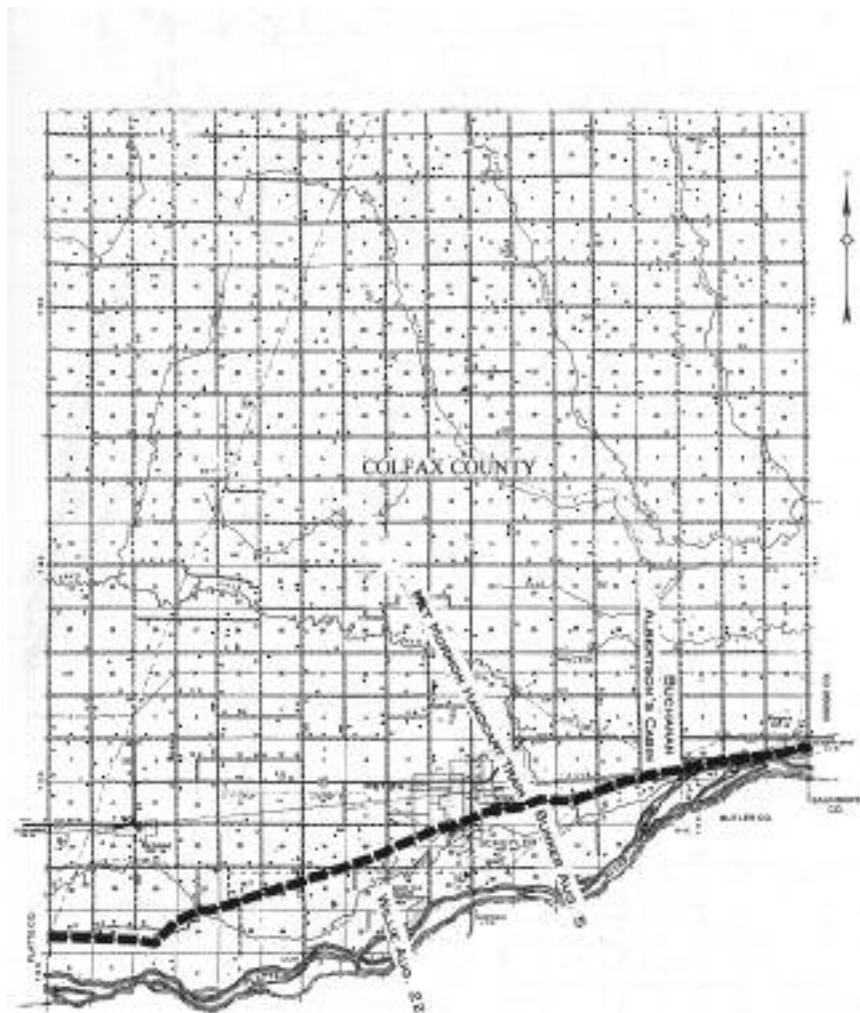
*1856 Military Map surveyed by John H. Dickerson  
Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives Division, U. S. Military Academy,  
West Point, New York.*



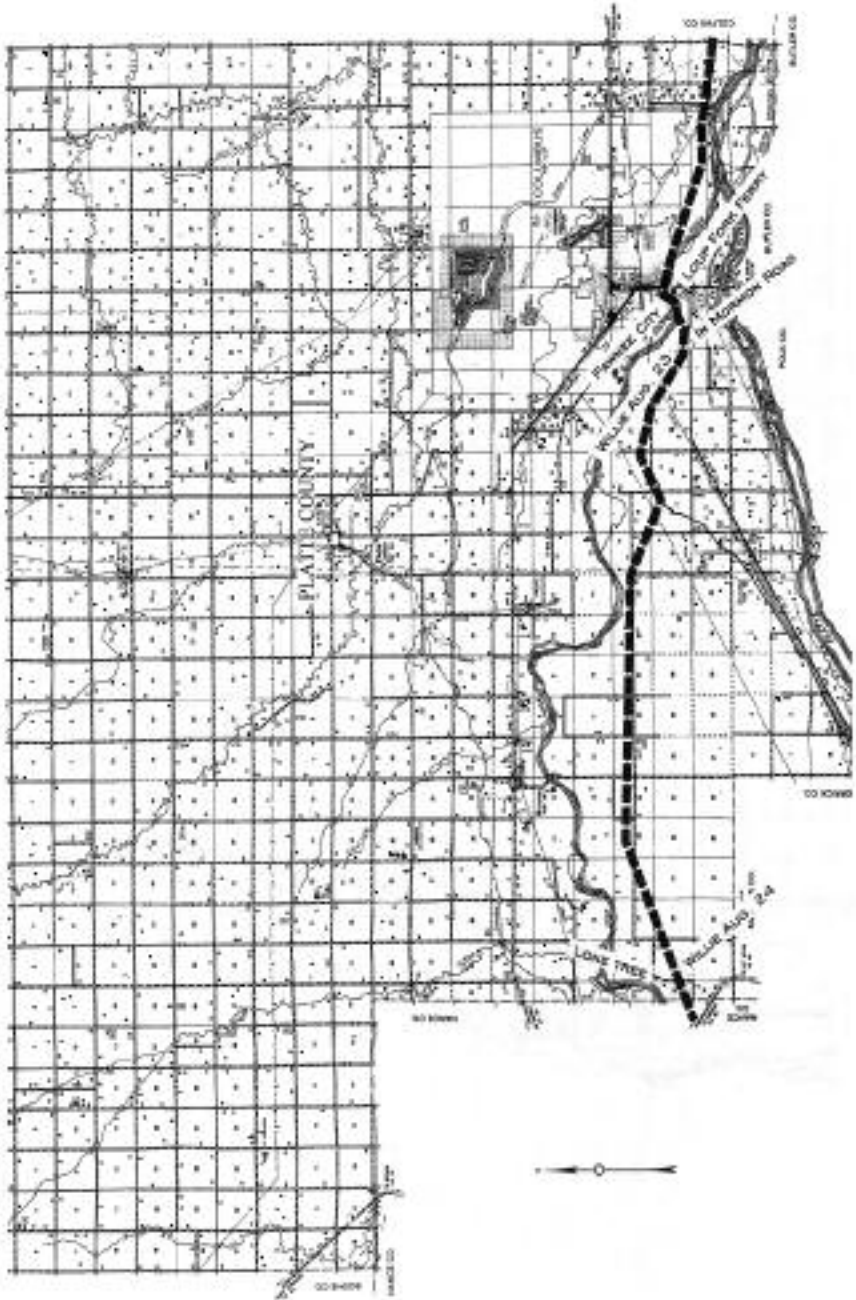
Douglas County, Nebraska



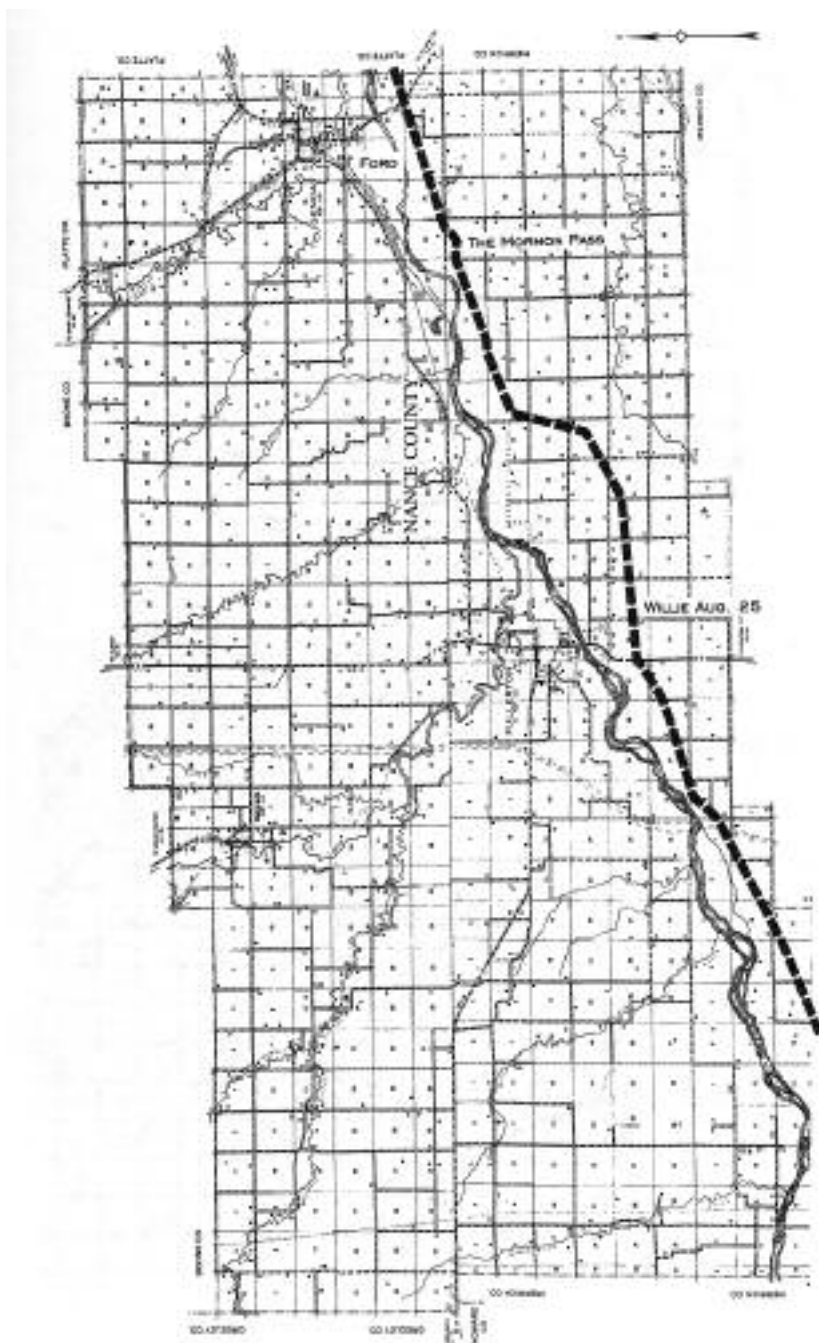
Dodge County, Nebraska



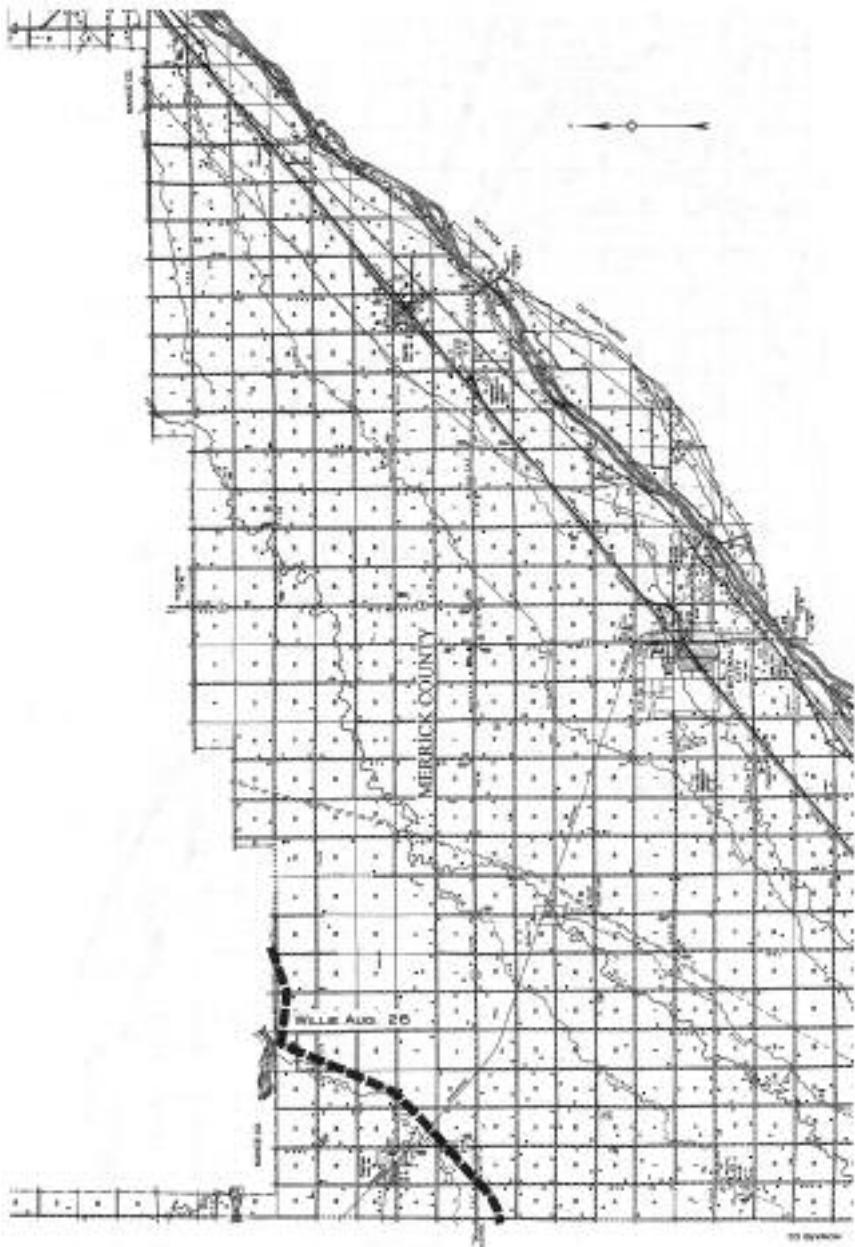
Colfax County, Nebraska



Platte County, Nebraska

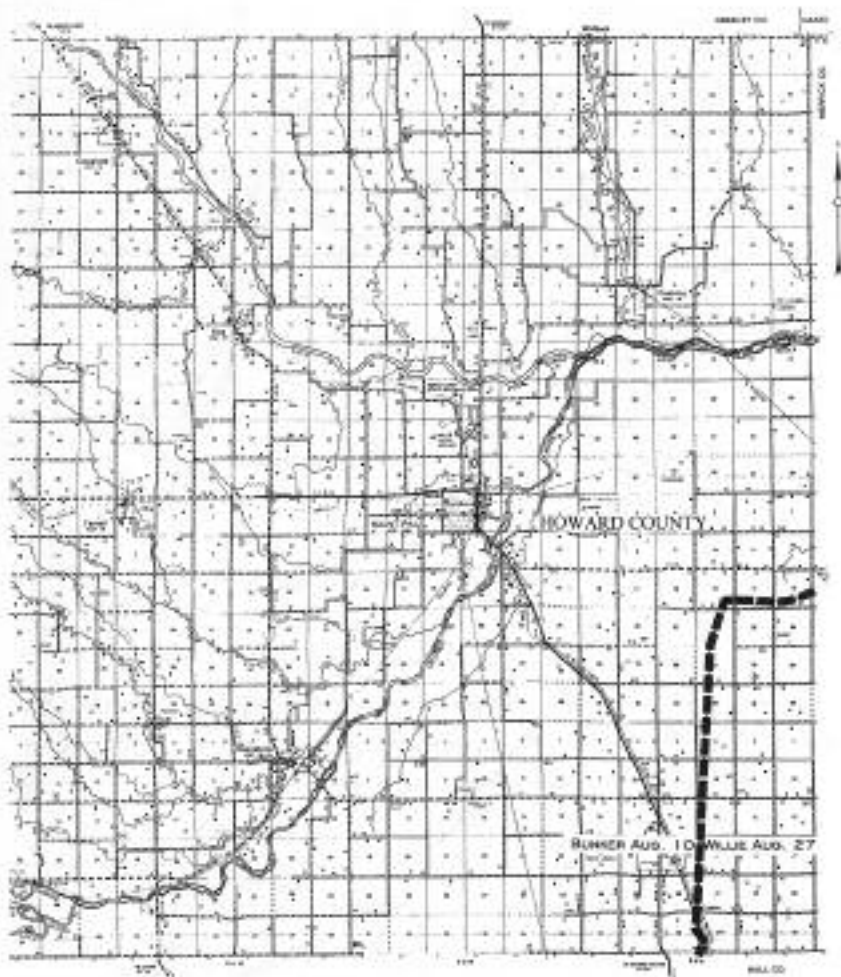


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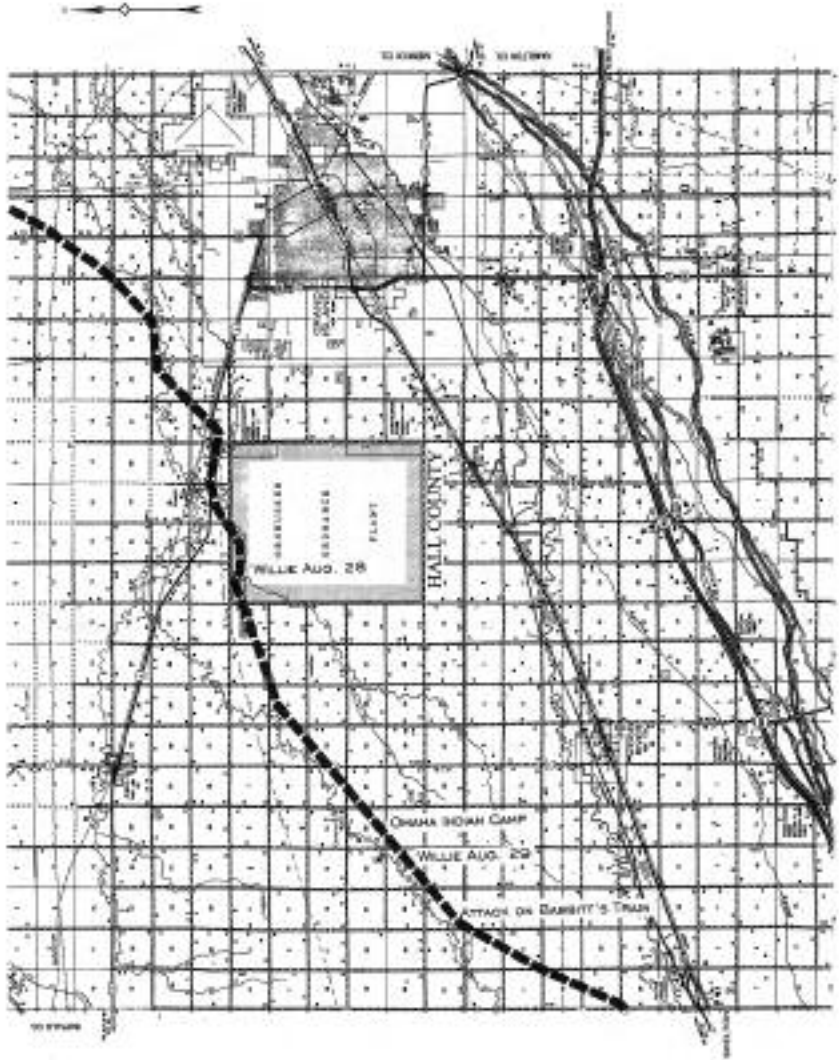


Merrick County, Nebraska

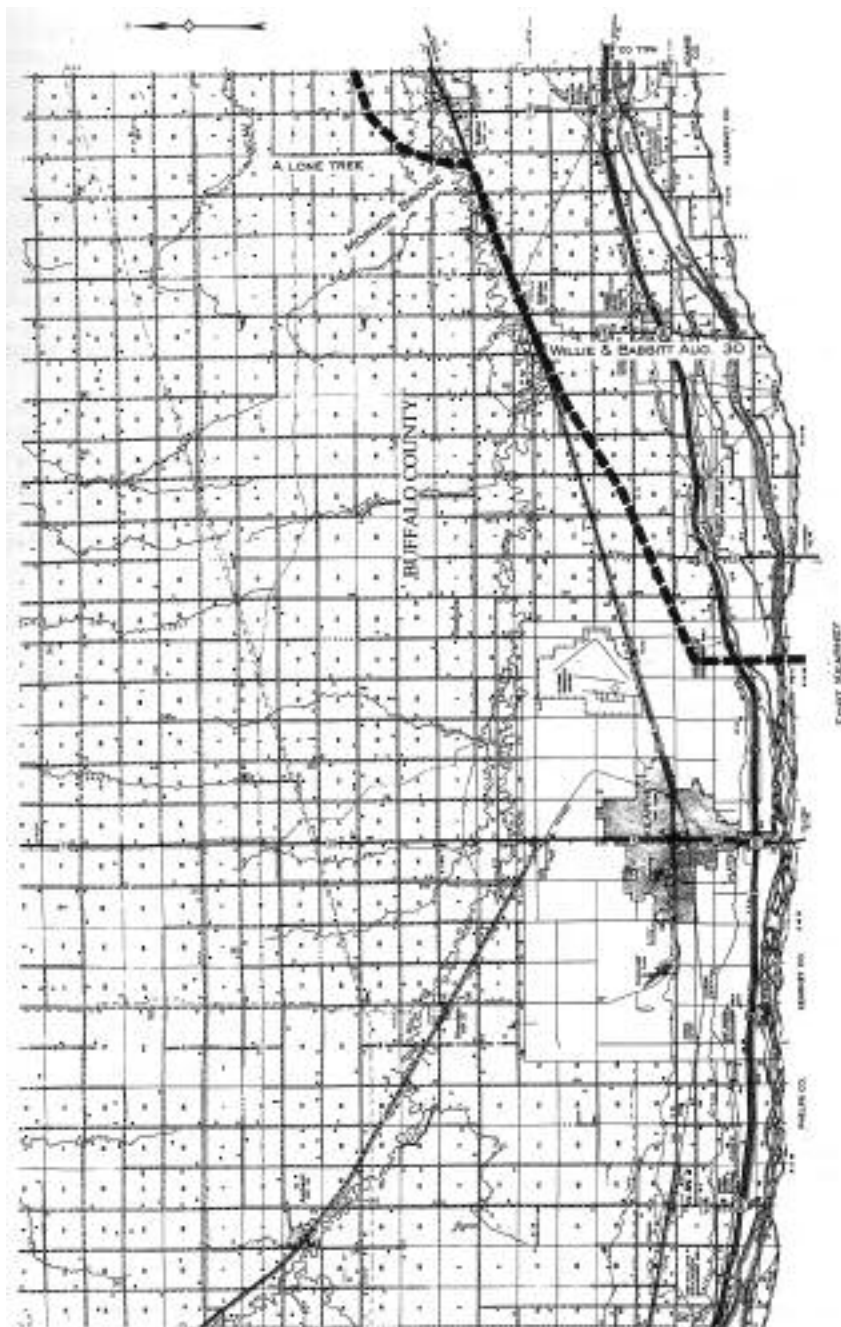




Howard County, Nebraska



Hall County, Nebraska



Buffalo County, Nebraska

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33. Dickerson, Report.

34. Henry Allyn, "1853 Diary," *Transactions of the Annual Reunion of the Oregon Pioneer Association*, 49 (June 1921), 192; Walters, Galloway, and Oakley, 2 August; Leonard, 6 August; Willie, Woodward, and Gadd, 30 August; Jaques, 11–12 September; Openshaw, 12 August; Nealon, "Morning Fair, Roads Bad," 80.

35. Dickerson, Report; Dickerson, Diary, 14, 16, and 22 July.

36. "A list of receipts by letter for the second volume of the *Times and Seasons*, during the third quarter" *Times and Seasons*, 2 (Nauvoo, Illinois, 1841), 485; Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4 (Salt Lake City: G. Q. Cannon and Sons Co., 1892–1904), 83, 463; *Council Bluffs Bugle*, 22 July 1856, reprinted in *The Mormon*, 9 August 1856, 2; *The Mormon* (21 February 1857), 2; Alexander Robbins to Brigham Young, 29 March 1857, Brigham Young Collection, HDC.

37. Dickerson, Report and Survey Notes.

38. Dickerson, Report.

39. Dickerson, Report and Maps.