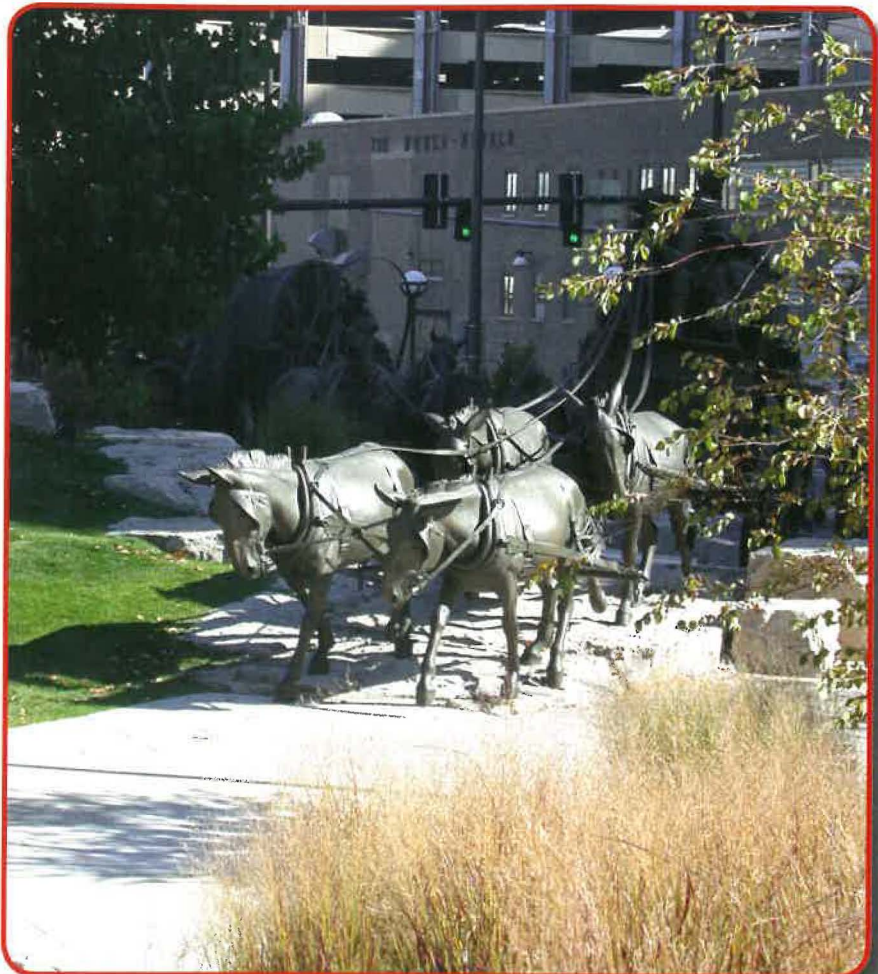


Omaha-Council Bluffs

Early History

35th Annual OCTA Convention
Council Bluffs, Iowa
August 8-15, 2017
Kira Gale



First National Pioneer Courage Park
Omaha, Nebraska

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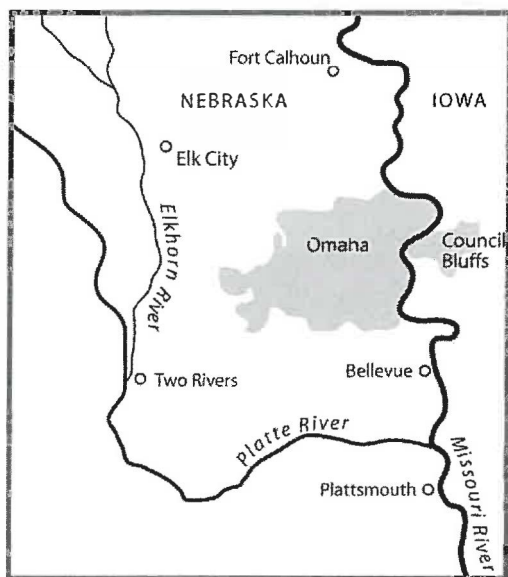
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First National Pioneer Courage Park
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Old Council Bluffs

In 1822 Manuel Lisa's men moved to Bellevue to establish a new trading post closer to the Platte River. Bellevue—with its founding date of 1822 and continuous occupation—is the oldest United States community in the American West. In 1823 the French Company (later acquired by the American Fur Company) established a post and Peter Sarpy began his long association with the area. Sarpy was a great grandson of the founding family of St. Louis.

Sarpy married Ioway Chief Hard Heart's daughter and Manuel Lisa and Lucien Fontenelle married the daughters of Omaha Chief Big Elk. Hard Heart died in 1823 but Big Elk lived until 1848 or '49. He provided wise leadership and worked with Sarpy to smooth the transition between Indian Country and "The Coming Flood" of emigrants and settlers.

A reservation for the Pottawatomie Indians from the Lake Michigan area was established in southwestern Iowa from 1837 to 1846. The Mormon exodus from Nauvoo, Illinois occurred in 1846. They renamed the Pottawatomie village Kanesville. It was a stopping place on their way to Utah.

The Mormon Trail on the north side of the Platte became known as the "Council Bluffs Road." It was used by estimated 200,000 travelers in 1841–66. Many were going to California and Colorado hoping to get rich by mining gold. Others were going to Oregon Territory to establish new homes. The outfitting towns of Omaha and Council Bluffs both owe their existence and initial growth to the travelers on the Council Bluffs Road.



Otoe village site across from Two Rivers State Recreational Area

The expedition arrived at the meeting place on July 31st. On August 1st, William Clark celebrated his 34th birthday with a dinner of "Saddle of fat Venison, an Elk fleece and a Bevertail . . . A Desert of Cheries, Plumbs, Raspberries, Currents and grapes of a Supr. Quality." On August 2nd the Otoe and Missouri chiefs arrived for the council bringing "watermillions" as gifts.

Captain Lewis is shown in the woodcut illustration with George Drouillard next to him interpreting in sign language. William Clark is undoubtedly on the right.

The captains distributed flags, peace medals and clothing to the chiefs and important men of the tribes they met with. They held councils with a dozen or more tribes in the months to come, announcing the change of government from the French and Spanish to the seventeen great nations of the United States.



Otoe Council, Fort Atkinson



Indian Eagle Flag with 17 stars at the Missouri River Basin Lewis and Clark Center in Nebraska City.



The Jefferson Peace Medal with the clasped hand of friendship.



George Catlin

The small white structure in the far distance is Cabanné's Post, painted by George Catlin in 1832. The river has since moved several miles east and the hills have been cut back. The site is near Hummel Park at Ponca Road and North River Drive.

Two German Princes



Duke Paul

Duke Paul, Prince of Württemberg, visited the post in 1823. He noted the death of Ioway Chief Hard Heart and attended his burial. On his return to Germany Prince Paul took Sacagawea's 19 year old son Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau back with him. Charbonneau lived in Europe for seven years before returning to America to become a mountain guide.



Prince Maximilian

Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied visited the post in 1833. The artist Karl Bodmer accompanied Prince Maximilian on his western travels. The journals of Maximilian and watercolors painted by Bodmer are at Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha.



Omaha Chief Big Elk

Ong-pa-tonga, Omaha Chief Big Elk, was painted by Charles Bird King in 1822 in Washington. He was born in 1755 and became the leader of the tribe in 1811. He died in 1848 or 1849.* Manuel Lisa married Big Elk's daughter Mitain and Lucien Fontenelle married another daughter, Meumbane.

Omaha Chief Big Elk and "The Coming Flood"

Big Elk led his people for many years. He was considered the greatest orator of the plains Indians. This speech most likely refers to a trip he made to Washington in 1838.

"My chiefs, braves, and young men, I have just returned from a visit to a far off country toward the rising sun and have seen many strange things. I bring to you news which saddens my heart to think of. There is a coming flood which soon will reach us, and I advise you to prepare for it. Soon the animals which Wakonda have given us for sustenance will disappear beneath this flood to return no more, and it will be very hard for you. Look at me; you see I am advanced in age. I am near the grave. I can no longer think for you and lead you as I did in my younger days. You must think for yourselves what will be best for your welfare. I tell you this that you may be prepared for the coming change. You may not know my meaning. Many of you are old, as I am, and by the time the change comes we may be lying peacefully in our graves; but these young men will remain to suffer. Speak kindly to one another; do what you can to help each other; even in the troubles with the coming tide. Now, my people, that is all I have to say. Bear these words in mind, and when the tide comes think of what I have said."

* Big Elk's birthdate was noted by Charles Bird King. See *The Omaha Tribe* by Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche (27th Annual Report Smithsonian Institution, 1911), pp. 84-85, 559 for the date of his death and the speech.



The site of their buildings has been the subject of an archeological dig by the Nebraska State Historical Society. The site is located on County Road P-51 immediately north of the quarry lake (which is surrounded by a chain link fence). The river has since moved east. The Otoe Council was held where the quarry lake is now located.



Major Long designed the shallow draft *Western Engineer* Steamboat. It had a dragon's head at the front through which steam escaped from its mouth. The paddle wheels were concealed under a cover at the stern or back of the boat. It was probably the first sternwheeler ever built and it was the first steamboat to ascend so far up the Missouri. The army's five steamboats, built for deeper waters, had failed much earlier.

Council with the Otoe and Missouria October 3–4, 1819



Major Stephen H. Long is seated on the bench wearing a red sash. The man standing with a red sash is Indian Agent Benjamin O'Fallon.



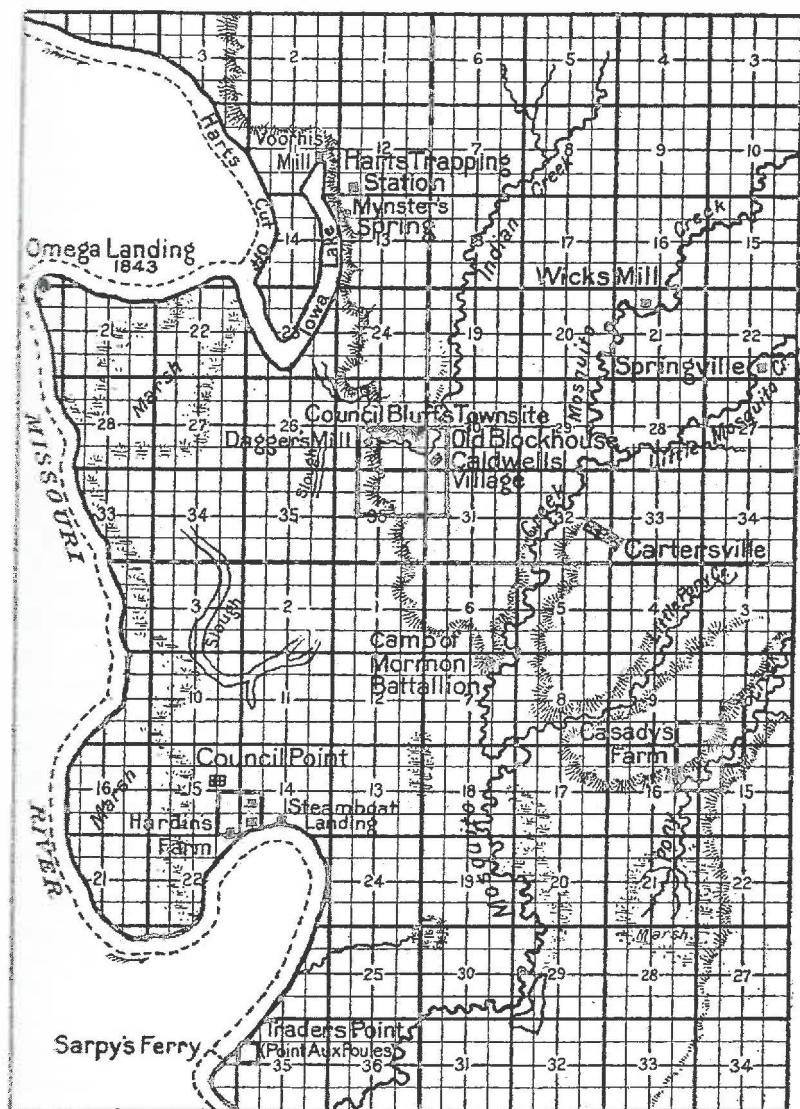
Manuel Lisa and his son observing the council. Colonel Henry Atkinson is to their right.



Nicomi, the daughter of Ioway Chief Hard Heart, married Dr. John Gale of Fort Atkinson. Her mother was Otoe-Omaha. She is standing at the back of the assembly of Otoe, Missouria and Ioway Indians.



Ioway Chief Hard Heart is on the left. Since he spoke English he was seated closest to the officers. Otoe chiefs are on the bench; Missouria chiefs are on the ground behind them.



Early Days at Council Bluffs by Charles Babbitt

Charles Babbitt's map locates the site of Hart's Trapping Station. His father, the first surveyor of Council Bluffs, showed him the ruins of an old Indian trading post there in 1855. Babbitt's book on early history was published in 1911. Heart's Bluff is the now the Lewis and Clark Monument bluff and the lake is called Big Lake. The grid lines on the map indicate sections. Trader's Point at Sarpy's Ferry was on the Iowa side of the river. After a river shift, the location is now on Gifford's Point in Nebraska. Trader's Point was also the location of Lewis and Clark's White Catfish Camp.



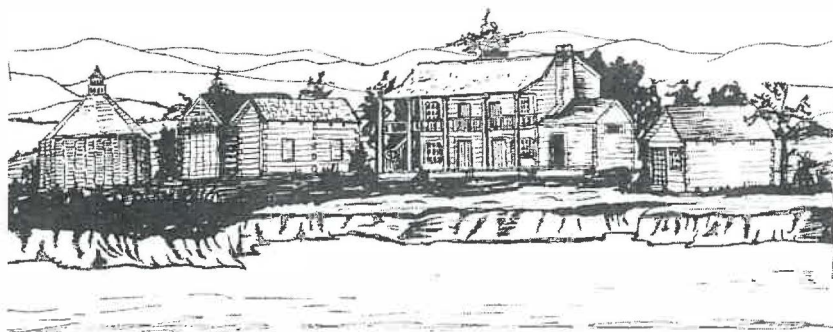
Karl Bodmer

Belle Vue Trading Post, 1822–1839

The post was established by Joshua Pilcher in 1822 as a new post of the Missouri Fur Company. (The company's old post at Fort Lisa continued to be in use through 1824.) Lisa's men tried to make a go of it as independent operators in the fur trade but by 1828 they were affiliated with the American Fur Company. Lucien Fontenelle acquired the Belle Vue post in 1828 and sold it to the government in 1832 for use as an Indian Agency for the Otoe, Omaha and Pawnee tribes. In 1828 Fontenelle began building a two story post for the American Fur Company at the site of their original double log cabin post half a mile south of the Belle Vue Post. Fontenelle was married to Big Elk's daughter Meumbane and they raised their five children at the two-story post.

Prince Maximilian and artist Karl Bodmer traveled on the steam boat *Yellow Stone* to explore the Missouri River in 1833–34. Bodmer painted this watercolor from sketches he made. Indian Agent John Dougherty and Joshua Pilcher were also on the boat going to their posts at Bellevue and Council Bluffs. When they reached Fontenelle's residence (the American Fur Company post) the prince noted it had fine cornfields and the land was extraordinarily fertile. A poorly cultivated acre yielded one hundred bushels of Indian corn, and a carefully cultivated acre yielded far more.

The buildings at the front of the picture of the Belle Vue post are the blacksmith shop. The agency buildings are located near the top of the hill. There was a graveyard under the trees. The site, located in today's Fontenelle Forest, may be visited.



The trading post site is located on a history walking trail north of Haworth Park in Bellevue.

Peter Sarpy and the American Fur Company Post Bellevue, 1823–56

Peter Abadie Sarpy arrived at Bellevue in 1824 when he was 20 years old. He was a great-grandson of the Chouteau family who founded St. Louis. When Prince Paul visited Bellevue in 1823 he delivered letters to the overseers at the double log cabin trading post owned by the Chouteau family (next to the corn crib). The family's French Company merged with John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company in 1826, becoming its Western Department. Peter's great-uncle owned the steamboat company.

Peter often worked for Jean Pierre Cabanné, the father-in-law of his brother John B. Sarpy. Cabanne managed the company's post at Council Bluffs in North Omaha. The American Fur Company dominated the fur trade. It was called "the company" and everyone else was "the opposition."

In 1832 Cabanné sent Peter Sarpy with a cannon and twenty men to confiscate whisky being brought up river by an opposition trader. There was a new federal law banning all liquor from Indian Country. Cabanne's own whisky shipment had been seized at Fort Leavenworth during a boat inspection and Cabanné was incensed that a rival had managed to slip past the inspectors. The rival, Narcisse Le Clerc, sued the company for damages. He was awarded \$9,200 in an out-of-court settlement and Cabanné and Sarpy were ordered to stay out of Indian Country for a year.

When Sarpy returned from exile in 1834 he married Nicomi, the daughter of Ioway Chief Hard Heart. Nicomi had an eight year old daughter, Mary, from her marriage to Dr. John Gale, a surgeon at Fort Atkinson. They probably lived at Cabanné's Post during the time that Joshua Pilcher managed it. In 1835 Sarpy took over the post and managed it for another year before it closed in 1836.



Marcus and Narcissa Whitman

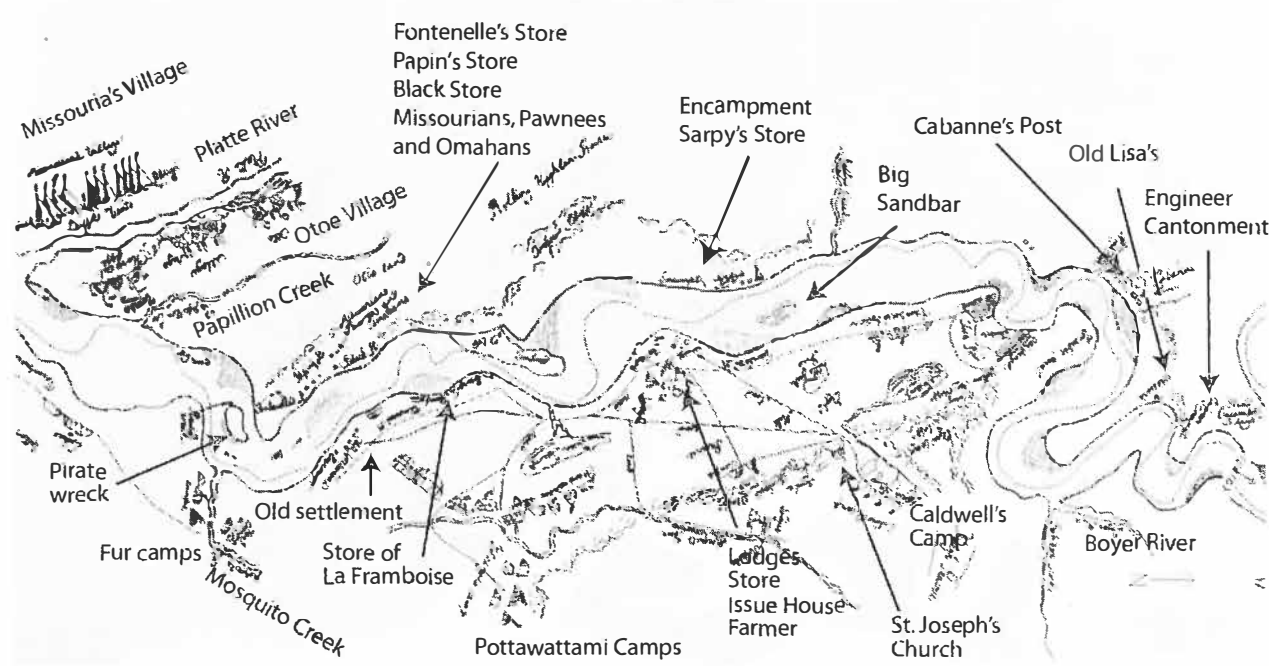
Bellevue log cabin, circa 1835

Lucien Fontenelle and Marcus Whitman

In 1835 Lucien Fontelle led a caravan of 50-60 men to a rendezvous at the Green River near South Pass. They traveled on the north side of the Platte to reach Fort Laramie and went from there to the Green River. Two Congregationalist ministers joined the caravan at Liberty, Missouri. Dr. Marcus Whitman and Samuel Parker were going west to determine where they would set up missions among the Indian tribes. The ministers didn't drink and they didn't travel on Sundays. The men of the caravan hated them, threw rotten eggs at them, and threatened to kill them.

All that changed when they reached Bellevue and cholera struck. Cholera is a bacterial intestinal disease that can kill quickly. It is caused by unsafe water and food contaminated by feces. The cure is good sanitation and clean drinking water. Whitman, a medical doctor, advised moving the men and the cabins up from the unhealthy river bottom to the bluffs. The log cabin at Bellevue is thought to have been moved to high ground on his advice. Three men died at Bellevue. Lucien Fontenelle was stricken with cholera and credited Dr. Whitman with saving his life. After that the men of the caravan did everything they could for the missionaries.

The next year, in 1836, Dr. Whitman and his bride Narcissa joined the caravan and briefly visited Council Bluff while en route to Walla Walla, Washington where they established a mission for the Cayuse Indians. Another minister and his wife set up a mission for the Nez Perce in Idaho. These were the first two white women to travel across the Rocky Mountains and Narcissa is given the credit for being the first. The story of two white women crossing the mountains in a wagon encouraged other women and their families to move to Oregon Country. Thus, by the doctor saving Fontenelle's life at Bellevue, the acquisition of Oregon for the United States was secured.



Father De Smet's map is an invaluable guide to Old Council Bluffs in 1838-39.



Wikipedia

The Mormon Battalion and the Discovery of Gold

When the Mexican-American War started in May of 1846 Colonel Stephen W. Kearny's Army of the West, stationed at Fort Leavenworth, was ordered to occupy Sante Fe and secure California for the United States. The Latter-Day Saints and the U.S. government reached an agreement that a Battalion of 500 LDS men would accompany Kearny's troops to California. It was the only religious-based unit in U.S. military history. The pay they received—about \$30,000—was a providential amount of money for the community they left behind.

Thomas Kane arrived at Council Bluffs in July, 1846 as President Polk's emissary. (In 1848 the Mormon settlement at Miller's Hollow was renamed Kanesville in his honor.) The Mormon Battalion enlisted in the army on July 16th. Their campground was at the Iowa School for the Deaf. They traveled on foot to Sante Fe and built a wagon road through the mountains of New Mexico which became the Southern Emigrant Trail to California. Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, Sacagawea's son, served as one of their guides. Members of the Battalion walked almost 2,000 miles to San Diego making it one of the longest infantry marches in U.S. Army history. The war ended in January, 1847 after the army gained control of California. The Battalion was discharged in July.

Battalion members on their way to the Salt Lake Valley were employed by John Sutter to build a saw mill on the American River 40 miles upstream from his fort at Sacramento. Mormons were working at the mill when Sutter's foreman, James Marshall, discovered gold on January 24, 1848. A Mormon newspaper in San Francisco announced the discovery of gold a few months later and the Gold Rush was on. The Mormons would earn most of their gold by serving as outfitters on the trail.



Kanesville in 1849-1851

Kanesville Becomes Council Bluffs

Simons sketched the above scene imaginatively, as he arrived in 1853 after the town had changed its name to Council Bluffs and was a bustling outfitting town. The great trail historian Merrill Mattes says "Council Bluffs became the number one jumping off point for all migration during the period 1852-1866." He estimated that trail traffic on the north side of the Platte was "closer to 40%" of the 500,000 people who traveled on the Great Platte River Road either to the mining country or to establish new homes in the west.

The greatest of all the emigrations was the California Gold Rush of 1849-50. On October 3rd, 1849, the *Frontier Guardian* newspaper publicized the benefits to Gold Diggers for jumping off at Kanesville:

"At Kanesville there are now some six stores with large and unlimited stocks of goods and other stores around, two Public Houses, a Bakery and Confectionary Establishment, Drug Store, four Wagon Shops. two Blacksmith's Shop, an Establishment for making Riding and Pack Saddles, Larrietts, Packing Bags, Lashings, &c., as well as other mechanics such as Gun Smiths, Watch Smiths, Harness Makers, &c. There are two Ferries across the Missouri River near, and probably will be more in the spring, that the range on the prairie for cattle is unlimited. . . ."

Between 4,000 and 5,000 wagons cross the river at Council Bluffs in 1850. In 1853 after the Mormon population had finished moving to the Great Salt Lake Valley the name of the town was changed to Council Bluffs.

* Myrtle Stevens Hyde, *Kanesville Conditions* (1997), 31. Walker D. Wyman, "Council Bluffs and the Westward Movement" (*Iowa History* 47, Apr. 1949), 104.



Steamboat Bertrand model at De Soto National Wildlife Refuge

Omaha and the Gold and Silver Rushes of 1859–1866

Omaha was established in 1854 by partners in the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company. The future of the town seemed bleak with the failure of the wildcat banks in the Panic of 1857. However, the government selected the north side of the Platte for a military road to Fort Kearny in 1857 (today's Military Road). In 1858 when gold was discovered in Colorado the road became the preferred route to the gold fields. The Council Bluffs Road was now called the Omaha-Denver Road.

Omaha boomed with the Colorado Gold Rush—268 steamboats arrived in 1859 bringing gold diggers bound for Denver. Nebraska City was booming as well with the military freighting business of Russell, Majors and Waddell. Omaha offered more services for travelers than the other towns along the river and prospered for years by outfitting travelers bound for the western mines.

Gold was discovered in Montana in 1863. On April 1, 1865 the Steamboat *Bertrand* was bound for Fort Benton, Montana on her maiden voyage when the boat hit a submerged log 25 miles upstream of Omaha. The boat, which was 161 feet long, sunk in just ten minutes in twelve feet of water. There were about forty passengers including several women and children going to Virginia City. The passengers and crew all got off safely.

In 1967 salvagers found the wreck of the *Bertrand* two and half miles east of the modern channelized Missouri. Eventually, 200 tons of cases, barrels and kegs filled with merchandise were retrieved. Because they had been buried in mud and not exposed to air, many of the 500,000 items were in mint condition. It is like stepping back in a time machine to the year 1865 when viewing the items on display at the De Soto National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center. The refuge is also home to many different kinds of migrating birds.