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Article Summary: Beals provided Nebraska communities with educational goals. Whether he was teaching or serving as an administrator, he always emphasized a systematic method of instruction.

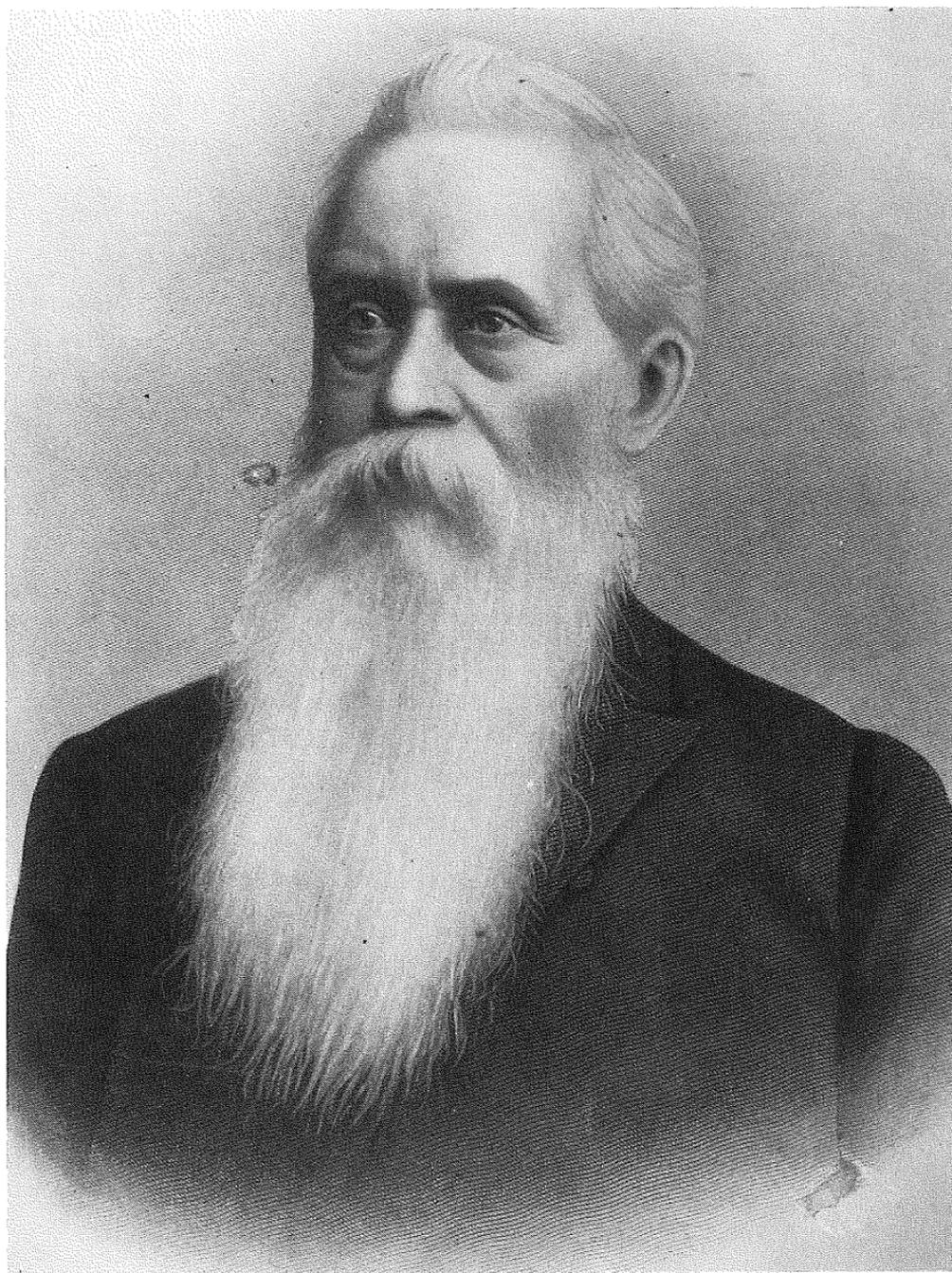
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Samuel DeWitt Beals

SAMUEL DEWITT BEALS

FRONTIER EDUCATOR

By R. McLARAN SAWYER

The establishment of educational facilities in frontier Nebraska was necessary for economic and social growth. To meet this requirement both public and private schools were started during the territorial period. In these schools there was always the problem of the temporary and transient nature of the teacher. The frontier furnished a myriad of opportunities to lure the teacher away from his poorly paid occupation. Without a few who regarded education as a lifework, the establishment of a frontier school system would have been a great deal more difficult. The professional educator provided the frontier community with a focal point for its educational goals. One of these educators was Samuel DeWitt Beals, Nebraska's first State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Beals was born January 10, 1826, at Greene, New York. After attending the village school, he studied at academies in Oxford and Norwich, New York. In 1847 he married Grace Elizabeth Williams of New York. Beals began teaching in his native state in the early 1850's, and in 1858 he was appointed principal of the Union School in Greene, New York.

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In April 1861 the family moved to Omaha where he opened a private school known as the Omaha High School. The school was located in rented rooms in the old territorial state house on Ninth Street between Douglas and Farnam. The school advertisement promised that, "This school will commend itself to all friends of the thorough and systematic course of education."¹

The Omaha High School rapidly outgrew its quarters, and in the fall of 1861 it was moved to the old Hampton House on the south side of Douglas Street between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets. These facilities were exchanged for larger ones in 1862 when the school moved to the First Baptist church and two rooms of an adjoining building called Case's Row on the north side of Douglas between Fifteenth and Sixteenth streets.

Beals' school was quite popular and attracted as many as ninety pupils from the Omaha area as well as from Sarpy, Nemaha, Washington, Dodge, and Burt counties.² The curriculum offered instruction in the primary branches, common English branches, higher English branches, and foreign languages at a cost of four to eight dollars for a four-month term. "Tuition to be paid one-half at the commencement, and one-half at the middle of the term. . . . No deduction, except in cases of prolonged sickness."³

In 1863 Beals purchased the First Baptist church building and had it moved to the southeast corner of Fifteenth and Capital avenue. The school continued at this location until it was closed in 1867. By that time the number of private, or as they were then called "select," schools had increased to the point of saturation. "There are about a dozen select schools in our city, and we regret to see they are very poorly attended—a fault we lay to the penuriousness of many of the parents of this city . . . at Beals' school the attendance rarely reaches 20."⁴

Faced with the problem of declining income on which he was unable to support his wife and two daughters, Emma Elizabeth and Clara Williams, Beals closed the Omaha School in May 1867 and accepted an appointment as clerk to Thomas P. Kennard, Secretary of State of Ne-

braska. The following year he became private secretary to Governor David Butler. Little is known regarding these years, except that he effectively performed his duties in his characteristic manner.

On April 5, 1869, Samuel DeWitt Beals was appointed State Superintendent of Public Instruction by Governor Butler. The school law passed on February 15, 1869, permitted the governor to appoint a state superintendent until one could be elected at the general election in 1870. In this assignment he was able to contribute much for the advancement of public education.

Beals found the public of the state eager supporters of education but in great need of leadership. "The desire of the people for the benefits of good schools, and their willingness to make all reasonable sacrifices to secure them, is excelled in very few states. . . . What they want is, that those to whom they are accustomed to look for counsel and leadership, shall present them with well advised and practicable measures."⁵ As state superintendent he identified the major educational problems and offered constructive solutions.

A major problem was the low quality of public school teachers. In visits to schools he found the teacher was frequently a person

. . . whose chief qualification was sufficient energy or enterprise to apply for a school rather than to be without work, and whose highest recommendation was a relationship to some resident of the district or, was a supposed necessity that the applicant must have a situation as teacher or perhaps be troubled to gain an honest living, has more frequently received public money, than has one who was well qualified, and whose work was worthy of the wages.⁶

Beals recommended three policies to raise the level of teaching. First, he wanted a uniform standard of teacher qualifications throughout the state. Although the teaching certificates were issued by county superintendents, the examinations and qualifying standards were supplied by the state superintendent for each of the three grades of teaching certificates issued. This spared the county superintendent much pressure when he refused to issue a certifi-

cate to an unqualified person. Second, he wanted gradually to raise the qualifications for certification of teachers. Third, he thought that a means should be provided through institutes for teachers to improve their classroom methods.

The county superintendents, with few exceptions, heartily approved of the higher standards for certification emanating from the State Superintendent. The Reverend J. M. Peebles, County Superintendent of Burt County, wrote, "I think there is a better class of teachers than heretofore, by far."⁷ H. K. Raymond, Superintendent of Otoe County, concurred, "Our teachers are of a higher grade—full fifty per cent."⁸ Similar expressions were received from the superintendents of Richardson, Gage, Sarpy, Washington, and Douglas counties.

Beals organized eight teachers' institutes as another means of improving teaching competence. The state was divided into eight districts and institutes were held, in 1869, at Omaha, Brownville, Nebraska City, Plattsmouth, Dakota City, Fremont, Salem, and Beatrice. The institute sessions were largely devoted to discussions of methods of instruction and practical illustrations in the use of recommended methods.

Constant reference was made to the following, the Pestalozzian principles. 1. Activity is a law of childhood. Accustom the child to do—educate the hand. 2. Cultivate the faculties in their natural order—first form the mind, then furnish it. 3. Begin with the senses, and never tell a child what he can discover himself. 4. Reduce every subject to its elements—one difficulty at a time is enough for a child. 5. Proceed step by step. Be thorough. The measure of information is not what the teacher can give, but what the child can receive. 6. Let every lesson have a point; either immediate or remote. 7. Develop the idea—then give the term—cultivate language. 8. Proceed from the known to the unknown—from the particular to the general—from the concrete to the abstract—from the simple to the more difficult. 9. First synthesis, then analysis; not the order of the subject, but the order of nature.⁹

Thus, the first year of Beals' superintendency was marked by an emphasis on improving teaching methods. This continued to be a prime goal in his career as an educator.

The lack of suitable school buildings also attracted Beals' attention. School boards were urged to apply for loans from the Permanent School Fund for construction purposes. This was the subject of considerable correspondence to Governor Butler who, along with the State Land Commissioner and the State Treasurer, was a custodian of the fund.

Mr. Beals has written me concerning it [a loan] and advised me to lay the case before you. He thinks the permanent State School Fund . . . might be made available . . . Mr. Beals wrote me that he would lay the case before the commissioners and if you can help us we shall be very thankful.

If we can get a little assistance for a year or two we shall be all right. We need the school houses *today*, our children are growing up in *ignorance* and we must use all means within our reach to erect houses immediately.¹⁰

While some loans were made for purposes of school construction, the Permanent School Fund was more usually loaned out for various commercial purposes, such as investment in farm mortgages and secured business loans. The interest from these loans was to be used for the support of public education. The handling of the fund led to the impeachment of Governor Butler.¹¹

Despite financial difficulties, unbelievable progress was being made in the construction of new school facilities. In 1869 only seventy-four public school houses existed in the entire state. One year later there were three hundred one. "Of these, six are stone, sixteen are brick, one hundred and ninety-six are frame, eight are log, and three are sod."¹²

During these years as State Superintendent of Instruction, personal tragedy struck the Beals family. In 1869 Emma Elizabeth Beals died at the age of seventeen, and a year later Clara Williams Beals died at twenty-two, both victims of consumption. The disease also struck Beals, with the result that he did not seek the State Superintendency of Public Instruction in the general election of 1870.

J. M. McKenzie, who became Nebraska's second State

Superintendent, had high praise for his predecessor in office.

I must say but few knew the difficulties under which he labored, or the amount of work he performed while an incumbent of this office. . . . At the time Mr. Beals was appointed *everything* was to be done; the work of the department was to be organized and systemetized; laws were to be compiled and published; all the forms of school reports were to be prepared; blanks were to be printed and distributed; duties were to be performed that required firmness and decision in their execution; the greatest care and wisdom were needed lest some mistake be made that would work great harm to the cause of education. The work of a master mechanic was demanded, with no plans or specifications to guide, only a heterogeneous mass of crude materials, scattered in various localities, to aid him in his labor . . .

He has laid the foundation, and others are building thereon. Let us hope that the edifice may be of as fair proportions and as beautiful as the original architect designed it should be.¹³

Because of ill health, Beals was inactive until the fall of 1872, at which time he accepted the principalship of South or Pacific Street School in Omaha. He held this position until 1873. During this time he instituted the procedure of grading the elementary students into separate classes on the basis of their academic accomplishments. This practice greatly increased the effectiveness of the instructional program.

Largely because of his eminent position as an educational leader, both major political parties nominated Beals in 1873 for the position of County School Superintendent of Douglas County. The Republicans believed, "He is the right man in the right place and is virtually elected already."¹⁴ The Democratic Party, calling itself the People's Party, meeting in county convention a few days later, endorsed the Republican candidate.

He is a known Republican. He had been nominated by the Republican Convention. But this made no difference. "Is he honest. Is he capable?" were the questions which were answered by his nomination. The certainty of his election renders it a certainty that we are able to have the best man in the State to fill this important position.¹⁵

In an era of hotly contested politics, the endorsement of both parties was reserved for only a few highly respected persons.

As county superintendent he revised the records of school district boundaries within Douglas County, and by this eliminated considerable confusion. Beals prepared a graded course of study for the county schools which resulted in uniform grading of students by level of accomplishment within the schools. This rendered school transfers easier for students and enabled new teachers to begin instruction at a level appropriate to the accomplishments of the students.

In July 1874 Beals was elected by the school board of Omaha as Superintendent of Schools. The previous superintendent, A. F. Nightingale, had resigned and accepted a position in another state. As Superintendent of Schools in Omaha, Beals instituted some of the reforms which had characterized his earlier school work. He graded the public schools so that from the primary grades through the high school studies proceeded in an orderly systematized fashion. As an educator, Beals always emphasized a systematic method of instruction.

This belief in the necessity of orderly step-by-step progress in education was also reflected in Superintendent Beals' concern with methods of teaching. In 1875 there was a public discussion in the press regarding the methods of instruction employed in the Omaha schools. The *Omaha Daily Bee* published a series of articles on instructional methods. In an interview the Superintendent discussed the teaching of reading in the first grade.

[Beals] said, we use the word method, in which we employ to some extent object lessons. A child comes to school for the first time. We point out to him a dog and ask him what it is, and he says "That is a dog." Then we ask him what a dog can do, and he will answer "A dog can eat." Then we will say to him let us see you make this dog eat, and he will reply, "Oh! he can't eat, it is only a picture of a dog." Then we say, yes this is only a picture of a dog! Then we say, yes this is only a picture, it stands for dog; now, do you see those letters under the picture? They stand for a dog too. Then we print them on the board, and tell them

whenever he sees that, it stands for dog. We have him print it on the board and then on the slate until he becomes perfectly familiar with it, and in this way we teach them one word a day.¹⁶

Today this method may not seem unusual. However, in the nineteenth century reading was usually taught by letter and syllable rather than a whole word. The syllable or phonetic method enabled children to read aloud words that they did not comprehend. Beals was emphasizing comprehension in reading with this method.

There had been the charge made that the standards were being raised too high in the schools and that children could not accomplish what was expected. The series of articles in the *Omaha Daily Bee* reveal rather modern methods of teaching elementary subjects and proved that unreasonable demands were not being made on elementary pupils. The complaints that the elementary schools were making excessive intellectual demands reveals an intense interest in the acquisition of practical or useful knowledge rather than anti-intellectualism.

However, concern about the curriculum of the public Omaha High School eventually resulted in Beals' dismissal from the city superintendency. The public high school, typical of that era, had an instructional program designed primarily to prepare its graduates for further education. For those not intending to go on to a college or university, it was widely believed that a college preparatory type of program would also best prepare them for their future life-work. The rationale was that the study of a curriculum with its emphasis on languages, natural history, mathematics, and other traditional academic subjects would teach the student how to use his mental powers. These concepts of faculty psychology were widely accepted in educational circles and became the basis of the report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies of 1893.

The disagreement over the public high school and its curriculum began to attract increasing attention in 1876. It was suggested, "That [the] High School should be abolished. All that approaches a University curriculum should

be torn out of the public school system, root and branch, including the dead and living languages."¹⁷ Those who supported the policies regarding the high school curriculum pointed out, with pride, the success attained by graduates of the high school in studies at eastern colleges and universities.

As the educational debate continued, the motivation and integrity of the participants became an issue. A letter to the editor of the Omaha *Republican* stated that:

It appears to me some very worthy gentlemen, among them some of the ministers of the city, are busy pulling the hot chestnuts out of the fire for two classes of the opposition—those who oppose Prof. Beals (one of whom wants his place), and those who favor the ruin of our High School to pave the way for the success of sectarian institutions.¹⁸

The conflict continued with increasing bitterness. By July 1879, the prolonged disagreement in the press reached its zenith of vituperation in an editorial in the Omaha *Daily Herald*.

A bigger swindle than yonder High School on Capital Hill was never imposed upon the taxpaying poor in any country, and there is not a man of sense in our Omaha Board of Education who does not know it. But these men hang on to it like a dead nigger to a decaying banana, and seem determined not to let go of the costly farce and fraud. But they will not hold on to it much longer. The HERALD intends to aid others to prick that bauble, sooner or later, in spite of professional educators and cowardly school managers who do their bidding, and the collapse shall not be long in coming.¹⁹

Because of his long association with secondary education, which even preceded his entrance into public school work in Nebraska, Samuel DeWitt Beals had become a controversial figure. Apparently more would now agree with the statement made by an irate citizen several years earlier: "all the trouble is with Beals. He doesn't know a common school from a university."²⁰ In December 1879, the first indication appeared that the Omaha Board of Education was losing confidence in its superintendent. A resolution was adopted which prohibited Beals from conducting meetings "for the consideration and instruc-

tion of teachers on matters pertaining to the theory and practice of teaching"²¹ more than twice a month.

At the Omaha Board of Education meeting in July 1880, Beals was not reelected Superintendent of Schools. He had become too controversial a person to continue to effectively lead the development of public education in Omaha. Considering the vulnerability of the position, his tenure in the post of superintendent for six yearly terms was an enviable record. Recognizing his abilities as a teacher, Beals was hired at the same Board of Education meeting to teach at the Omaha High School.

Although the period of his major contribution to the development of public education had come to an end, he taught in the Omaha public high school for the next twenty years. On April 27, 1900, Samuel DeWitt Beals died in Omaha at the age of seventy-four years and is buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery. By this time, the rancor of twenty years earlier had passed, and the Omaha Board of Education unanimously adopted the following resolution:

Whereas, it has pleased Almighty God to remove from the scene of his labors in the public schools of Omaha and Nebraska, Professor S. D. Beals, who has for nearly thirty years borne an active and honored post in the education of the youth of the State of Nebraska, and of the city of Omaha in particular, and who has had much to do with and been of great service to the public schools both of the state and of the city.

Therefore, be it resolved, that the Board of Education of the School District of Omaha as a body, and its members individually, express the profoundest sorrow at the loss of Professor Beals from among us, and extend to his bereaved family our heartfelt sympathy in the affliction which has come upon them.

Resolved further, that this resolution shall be entered at large upon the records of this Board and that copies thereof be supplied to the daily papers of this city and of Lincoln, and also that a copy be sent to the family of Professor Beals.²²

The Omaha Board of Education further recognized the outstanding contribution of Beals to Nebraska edu-

cation by naming an elementary school constructed in 1904 at 1720 South 48th Street in his honor.

The life of this educator was eloquently summarized by the *Omaha Daily Bee*, "Mr. Beals was the oldest instructor in the state of Nebraska and the record of his personal life has been the history of the development of the public school system of the city and the state."²³

NOTES

¹ *Nebraska Republican*, May 8, 1861.

² Savage, James W. and J. T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (Munsell, New York, 1894), pp. 310-311.

³ *Nebraska Republican*, April 12, 1862.

⁴ *Omaha Daily Herald*, April 21, 1867.

⁵ *First Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of Nebraska for the Year Ending December 31, 1869* (Omaha, 1869), pp. 51-52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

¹⁰ Letter from L. B. Filley to Governor David Butler, July 9, 1870, MSS, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹¹ Governor David Butler was impeached on March 1, 1871 for having borrowed \$16,881.26 from the permanent school fund for the purpose of personally purchasing at public auction city lots in the new state capital at Lincoln. He was found guilty of the charge and removed from office on June 1, 1871.

¹² *Second Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of Nebraska for the Year Ending December 31, 1870* (Omaha, 1869), p. 124.

¹³ *Third Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of Nebraska for the Year Ending December 31, 1871* (Des Moines, 1872), p. 12.

¹⁴ *The Omaha Bee*, October 6, 1873.

¹⁵ *Omaha Weekly Herald*, October 10, 1873.

¹⁶ *Omaha Daily Bee*, March 6, 1875.

¹⁷ *Omaha Weekly Herald*, January 21, 1876.

¹⁸ *Omaha Republican*, April 20, 1877.

¹⁹ *Omaha Daily Herald*, July 31, 1879.

²⁰ *Omaha Republican*, March 1, 1877.

²¹ *Omaha Daily Bee*, December 2, 1879.

²² *Minutes*, Board of Education, Omaha, Nebraska, May 7, 1900.

²³ *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 28, 1900.