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Article Title: Bellevue: The First Twenty Years

Full Citation: Richard E Jensen, "Bellevue: The First Twenty Years," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 339-374.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975Bellevue.pdf>

Date: 2/10/2016

Article Summary: This article explores the founding and early growth of Bellevue, Nebraska, based on some new data and, to a degree, upon a reinterpretation of some older material. Pages 369 through 370 provide an excellent, abbreviated summary of the early history Bellevue.

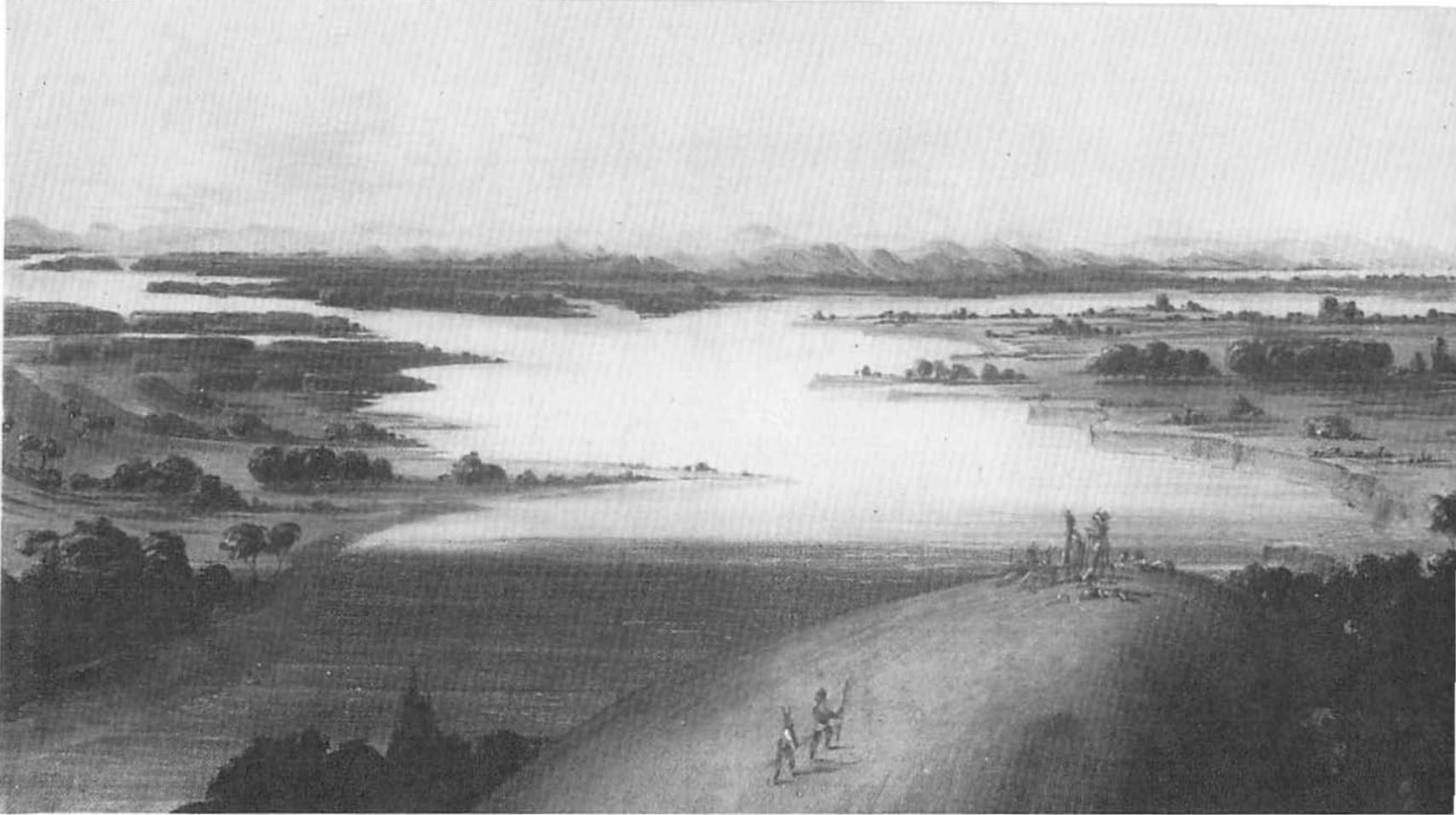
Cataloging Information:

Names: Joshua Pilcher, Manuel Lisa, John Sunder, Pedro de Villasur, Thomas Hempstead, John P Cabanne, Andrew Woods, John C Calhoun, Stephen H Long, David Meriweather, Mr Robidoux, Paul Wilhelm, Henry Atkinson, John R Bell, Edwin James, Michael E Immel, Robert Jones, William H Ashley, Andrew Henry, Henry Leavenworth, James Kennerly, James O Pattie, Lucien Fontenelle, Andrew Drips, Charles Bent, William Vanderburgh, John Dougherty, Warren Angus Ferris, C Chaucer Goss, D E Reed, Peter A Sarpy, Samuel Allis, Joseph LaBarge, John E Wickman, Father DeSmet, Benjamin O'Fallon, James Barbour, John Eaton, Lewis Cass, Samuel Parker, Maximilian [Prince of Wied], John Treat Irving Jr, William Marshall Anderson, Moses and Eliza (Wilcox) Merrill, John Dunbar, Marcus Whitman, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, R P Beauchamp, C G Clark, George Casner, Francis Sanscoucier, William Clark, Joseph V Hamilton, Daniel Miller.

Place Names: Fort Atkinson, Nebraska [once known as Council Bluffs...not the one in Iowa]; Papillion Creek [also known as Butterfly Creek], Nebraska; Platte River, Nebraska; Mosquito Creek, Nebraska; Cantonment Morgan, Missouri; Fort Lisa, Nebraska; Cotes a Kennel.

Keywords: Missouri Fur Company

Photographs / Images: Map: Bellevue and Council Bluffs area; Artifacts from the archeological investigations at the Bellevue trading post (two pages); Father Pierre Jean DeSmet's Map; Water color by Alfred Jacob Miller, "Fontenelle Chased by Grizzly Bear" [Courtesy of Northern Natural Gas Company, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha]; Andrew Drips; Samuel Allis; Karl Bodmer's "Bellevue" painted in 1833 [Courtesy of the Northern Natural Gas Company Collection, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha]; "A Log Cabin on the Western Frontier" painted by Alfred Jacob Miller in 1837 [Courtesy of Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore]



George Catlin's "Mouth of the Platte River," painted in 1832. The view is toward the north. Bellevue was at the base of the bluff slightly to the right of center. (Courtesy of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution)

BELLEVUE: THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS, 1822—1842

By RICHARD E. JENSEN

INTRODUCTION

It was early October, 1822, when the Missouri Fur Company's keelboat bound for St. Louis arrived at the company's headquarters near Fort Atkinson. The boat, carrying a cargo of beaver pelts valued at \$14,000, was safely out of hostile Indian territory, and therefore those of the crew performing security duties could be reassigned to other duties. Joshua Pilcher, the company's senior partner, instructed these men to erect a new headquarters and trading post. Work was begun on October 7, and a week later reinforcements arrived on another company boat descending the river. The new post was located in the bluffs on the west side of the Missouri River eight miles above the mouth of the Platte. It was to be called Bellevue.

Although some details of this narrative are fictitious, historical evidence now shows that the origin of the city of Bellevue, Nebraska, can be traced directly and without interruption to this old trading post. In addition to being one of the oldest communities in the state, Bellevue has the dubious honor of having one of the most tangled and confused historical records of any community in the area. Some early writers have interjected bits of what might properly be termed folklore. One example concerns the origins of the community's name. Between 1805 and 1807 Manuel Lisa, a St. Louis businessman, is purported to have climbed the bluff north of Papillion Creek and upon seeing the beautiful view exclaimed "*la belle vue.*" While this assertion cannot be disproven, it is curious that if

true, the name was not used in written history for nearly twenty years. Another problem concerns the early writers' reliance upon oral history which in at least one instance seems to have been greatly oversimplified. Finally, there has been no small amount of difficulty distinguishing events which occurred at Bellevue from those which happened in the vicinity of Fort Atkinson twenty-five miles to the north. These comments are not intended as a criticism of early historians' ability or integrity but merely to point out the kinds of problems which had to be faced. History is almost always refined and clarified as new data becomes available, and hopefully some future historian will fill in the blanks and prove or disprove the suppositions in this presentation.

The purpose of this paper is to re-examine Bellevue's first twenty years in light of recently discovered information. Much important data found in the Bellevue Indian Agency records has been reproduced on microfilm, thereby making it readily available to the student of history.¹ This study was further advanced by the timely publication of John Sunder's biography of Joshua Pilcher,² which provides important data on events at Bellevue. Finally, recent archeological investigations have been completed at the site of the old trading post located in what is now Fontenelle Forest. The identification of the site was accomplished through archeological evidence combined with contemporary descriptions, maps, and drawings. This evidence is presented in detail in an archeological report of the site being prepared by this writer.³ Special thanks must be given to Mr. Ed Sterba, President of the Sarpy County Historical Society, and Mr. Gary Garabrandt, naturalist at Fontenelle Forest, for their part in locating this historic site and also to the board of directors of Fontenelle Forest for allowing us to excavate the site, which is within the forest. The discovery of the exact location of the post has proved to be an important key in unraveling the tangled history of Bellevue's first twenty years.

THE FUR TRADE YEARS

The quest for furs had brought both French and Spanish trading parties into the Missouri basin nearly a hundred years before this vast area became a possession of the United States.

In 1720 one group of French traders and their Pawnee allies badly mauled a Spanish expedition under the command of Pedro de Villasur. The event which occurred in central Nebraska, possibly on the Platte River, marked the end of Spanish activity on the central plains for nearly sixty years. It was only after French influence in all of North America began to wane that the Spanish re-entered the fur trade along the Missouri River. During the last two decades of the 18th century several expeditions ascended the river, but only a few went as far upstream as present-day central South Dakota. One of these expeditions built the first known trading post in the vicinity of Bellevue, probably near Papillion Creek. It was erected in the fall of 1795 but was abandoned less than a year later.⁴

In 1806 the American explorers, Lewis and Clark, returned to St. Louis from their epic journey to the Pacific Northwest and confirmed the rumors of teeming beaver streams near the headwaters of the Missouri River. Manuel Lisa, a St. Louis businessman, quickly organized a company for the purpose of exploiting this potential source of wealth. Lisa's expedition, consisting of at least fifty men aboard two keelboats, left St. Louis in the summer of 1807 and ascended the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers to the mouth of the Bighorn. Here, part of the company engaged in trade with the neighboring tribes. Weapons, blankets, costume jewelry, tobacco, and liquor were exchanged for virtually any kind of pelts the Indians could procure. Other members of the expedition were sent out to trap beaver, which abounded in the rivers and streams.

The success of this first expedition to the upper Missouri led to more ambitious undertakings in the ensuing years. The successor to this organization, which came to be known as the Missouri Fur Company, underwent a bewildering, complex series of reorganizations during the next ten years, but through it all Lisa remained the principal leader of the expeditions and the unifying force in the company. He was one of the dominant figures in the upper Missouri fur trade during the last twelve years of his life. He died in St. Louis on August 12, 1820, after a short illness.⁵

Lisa's death was a severe blow to the Missouri Fur Company; however, on September 20 the remaining partners signed a contract which was to remain in effect for four years. Under the

terms of this agreement, Thomas Hempstead served as business manager in St. Louis while Joshua Pilcher acted as field representative in charge of the company's outposts and their fur traders.⁶

It was primarily through Pilcher's efforts that this reorganization of the Missouri Fur Company attained a degree of success. He had been a merchant and banker in St. Louis in 1819, when financial reverses forced him, at the age of 30, to join Lisa's company. Although Pilcher was a junior partner, he served an apprenticeship as a trader among the Indian tribes throughout what is now northeastern Nebraska.⁷ This experience combined with business knowledge acquired in St. Louis was undoubtedly instrumental in his swift rise to leadership in the reorganized company.

During the first two years of its existence, the new company experienced minor financial difficulties, but overall it was solvent and growing. The Franklin, Missouri, newspaper, *Missouri Intelligencer*, reported on October 19, 1822, that a Missouri Fur Company boat had just arrived with "furs & peltries worth \$14,000, from the Rocky Mountains. Another parcel belonging to the same company, worth \$10,000 is on the river, and expected to arrive in the week coming."⁸

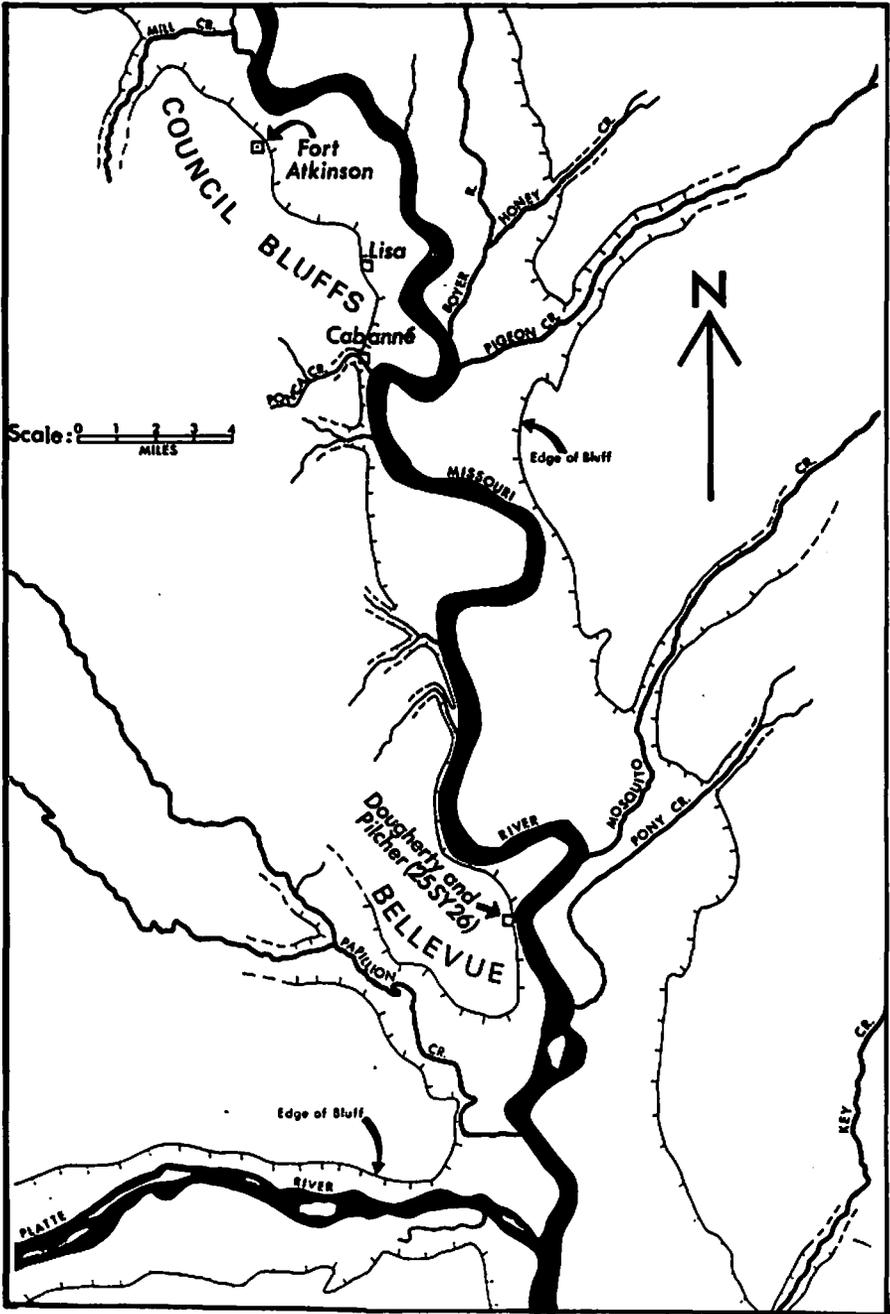
The company's plan to monopolize the fur trade through a chain of posts from Missouri to the Pacific was a distinct possibility by the end of 1822. That summer Fort Vanderburgh had been built near the Mandan villages in what is now central North Dakota,⁹ and a little earlier Fort Recovery had been established on the Missouri River in central South Dakota.¹⁰ It seems probable that the post at Bellevue was also constructed during this time of expansion and relative affluence.

From 1820 until at least 1824, Pilcher's primary base of operations on the Missouri was a trading post built by Manuel Lisa. It still belonged to the Lisa estate, and what arrangement, if any, Pilcher had with the Lisa heirs is not known.¹¹ The post is believed to have been about five miles southeast of present-day Fort Calhoun, Nebraska; however, the exact location has not been determined. This general area, which included John P. Cabanne's American Fur Company post and the U.S. Army's

Fort Atkinson, was known at that time as Council Bluffs. It should not be confused with the modern community of Council Bluffs, Iowa, which appropriated the name in the 1850's.

Shortly before the Lisa post was abandoned, newer quarters were built at Bellevue. Although the exact date of the construction of the new post cannot be established from available historical records, it can be fixed within reasonable limits. According to Sunder the Bellevue post was built early in 1823.¹² Morgan has published a letter to Pilcher from Thomas Hempstead in St. Louis dated February 12, 1823, which mentioned a new fort or trading post.¹³ Hempstead's letter dealt in part with the problems he had supplying their "Kansas Establishment," which was one of the company's posts operated by Andrew Woods, a junior partner. It was located on the west side of the Missouri River about one mile above the confluence with the Kansas River.¹⁴ Hempstead decided to keep a herd of pack animals in St. Louis for use by "the mountain men in April next that will come with me to the new Fort by land." In a footnote Morgan wrote that "with this casual remark Hempstead documents the beginnings of the famous post at Bellevue, the date for which has been problematical."¹⁵ Morgan goes on to suggest that the Lisa post at Council Bluffs may have been abandoned because it was in a state of decay or may have been reclaimed by Lisa's heirs. Morgan's conclusion that the "new fort" was at Bellevue seems highly probable but cannot be supported with direct corroborative evidence.

There is negative evidence from several sources which suggests that a permanent post at a site later called Bellevue had not been established by 1819 or 1820. All these sources are directly or indirectly a result of what was popularly called the Yellowstone Expedition. This military force was mounted by orders of Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, who conceived the plan of establishing a chain of forts in the Indian territory of northwestern United States. Although the plan was never completed, the expedition did ascend the Missouri River as far as old Council Bluffs in 1819, and late in the fall Cantonment Missouri was erected on the river flood plain a short distance north of the bluffs. In the spring it was partially destroyed by flood waters, and a new installation, Fort Atkinson, was built on the bluffs.



Bellevue and Council Bluffs area.

The first contingent of the expedition passed the Bellevue area on September 15. This unit consisted of a party of scientists and soldiers under the command of Major Stephen H. Long. The journal of the expedition was compiled by Edwin James from the notes of several other members of the party. He described the area around the mouth of the Platte River, Papillion Creek, and Mosquito Creek and mentioned the abandoned Oto and Iowa Indian villages in the vicinity.¹⁶ A few days earlier they were passed by two boats of St. Louis traders who "were to remain for the winter at the mouth of the Papillion, to trade with the Otoes, Missouris, and other Indians."¹⁷

The traders were identified by David Meriweather, who accompanied the expedition in the capacity of sutler. In his autobiography dictated 65 years later, he recounted a trip made in January, 1820, from Cantonment Missouri, predecessor to Fort Atkinson, to Cantonment Morgan, Missouri, for medical supplies. He recalled that "the first night we camped a little below Fort Lisa, and the second night at the mouth of the Platte River near which we found a trading house, which had recently been erected by Mr. Robidoux a trader from St. Louis."¹⁸ The possibility that this post might be Bellevue should be briefly considered, although it does not seem likely. At this time the Robidouxes were close business associates of the Chouteaus, long-time competitors of the Missouri Fur Company both before and after the reorganization caused by Lisa's death. If this post were Bellevue, it must have been sold to the Missouri Company prior to the visit by Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wuerttemberg, in 1823.¹⁹ No record or even a suggestion of such a transaction has been found. In addition, Wilhelm's description of the Missouri Company post - and other descriptions as well - clearly indicate that this post was several miles above the Platte River and Papillion Creek.

Another contingent of the Yellowstone Expedition under the command of Colonel Henry Atkinson reached the Platte River on September 26, 1819. The journalist for this group was John Gale, who wrote a brief description of the topography of the area and mentioned the "two trading boats" near Papillion Creek.²⁰

In the spring of 1820, Captain John R. Bell journeyed up the east side of the Missouri River to the new military fort at Coun-

cil Bluffs. He described the difficult crossing of Mosquito Creek and mentioned that he could see the mouth of the Platte River from a high point in the bluffs north of the creek.²¹ Bell was accompanied by Edwin James, who only reported that they were forced to "swim across Misquito Creek."²²

If an outpost at Bellevue existed in 1819 or in 1820, it was not mentioned in any of the surviving journals or diaries. Such an omission on the part of all of the writers is difficult to accept. This is especially true of the military journalists who had been ordered to include references to all points of interest and "permit nothing worthy of notice" to escape their attention.²³ A fur-trading post would certainly seem sufficiently important to warrant comment. On the basis of this negative evidence, it is highly unlikely that the Bellevue post was in existence prior to 1820.

The earliest precise reference to the new Missouri Fur Company trading post can be found in the account written by the naturalist, Paul Wilhelm. In 1823 he traveled up the Missouri River and through what is now eastern Nebraska and central South Dakota. On July 29, 1823, he reached the mouth of the Platte River and described the area to the north:

A great sandbank adjoining an island and covered with much driftwood closes the mouth of the outlet of the Platte. . . .

As far as the shallow little Butterfly Creek (Riviere au Papillon), the banks are covered with timber, later no more with trees but only meadow growth. On the sandbanks close to the water were low willows, whose seed easily takes root. The left . . . bank continues to be low and overgrown with cottonwoods. Then a stretch of prairie comes close to the bank, extending as far as a row of hills called Cotes a Kennel, on the slope of which the American Company at that time had a factory.

We reached this settlement by sundown after traveling along a meadow overgrown with tall nettles and flax-like weeds. The little Mosquito Creek flows into the stream from the left between willows. I set out from the boat in order to deliver my letters to the overseers of the American Company and stayed overnight.²⁴

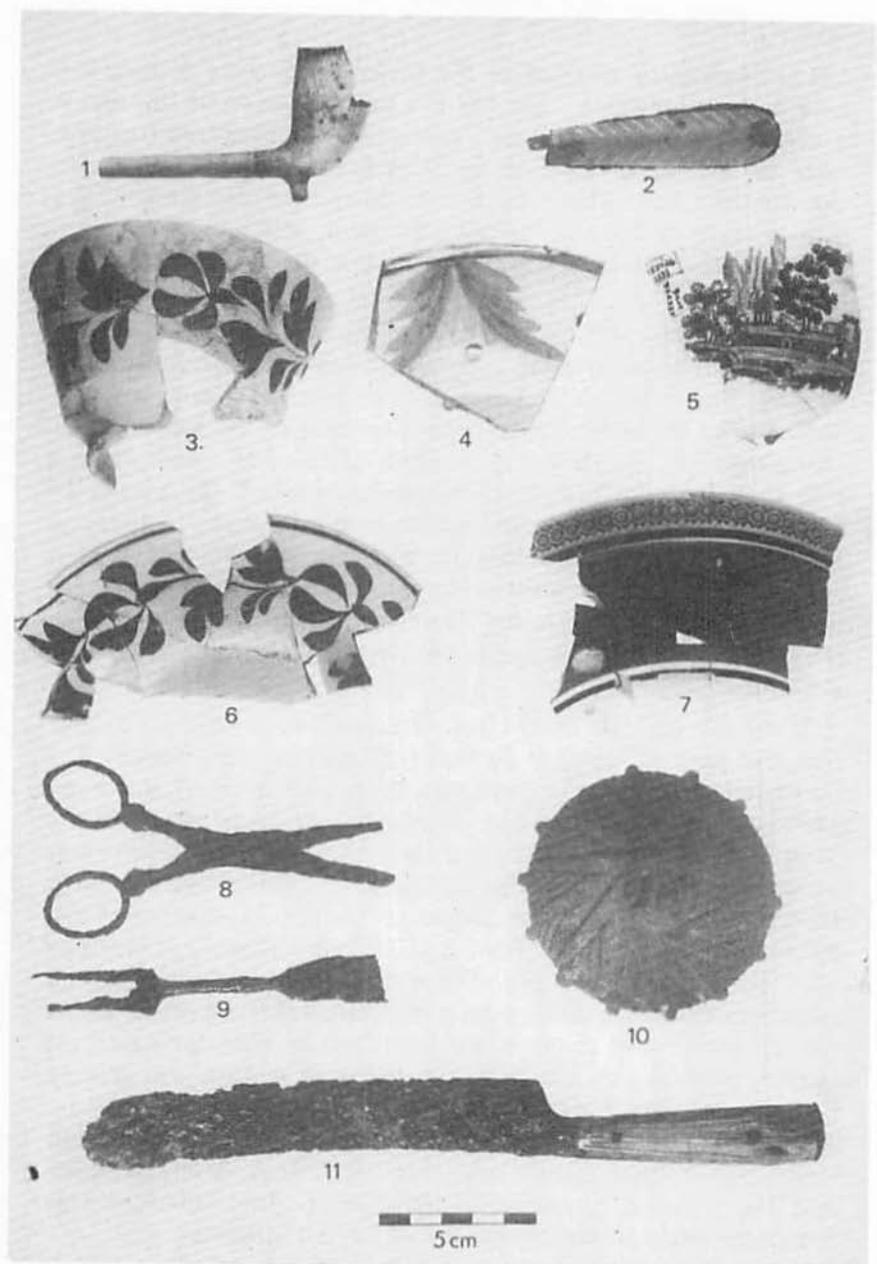
From the south side of the Platte valley to the southern edge of modern Bellevue is an extensive flood plain about five miles in length where both the Platte River and Butterfly Creek (present-day Papillion Creek) empty into the Missouri. North of this for a distance of one and one-half miles is slightly higher land — Wilhelm's "stretch of prairie" — which extends to the high bluffs which he calls "Cotes a Kennel." Today most of this bluff area is owned by the Fontenelle Forest Association, where

the archeological remains of the trading post were found. Wilhelm's statement that "the *left* bank continues to be low and is overgrown with cottonwood" seems to be an insertion that pertains to the eastern side of the Missouri and is consistent with the remark that "Mosquito Creek flows into the stream [the Missouri] from the *left*." Mosquito Creek, still so-named, empties into the Missouri from the east a short distance above Bellevue.

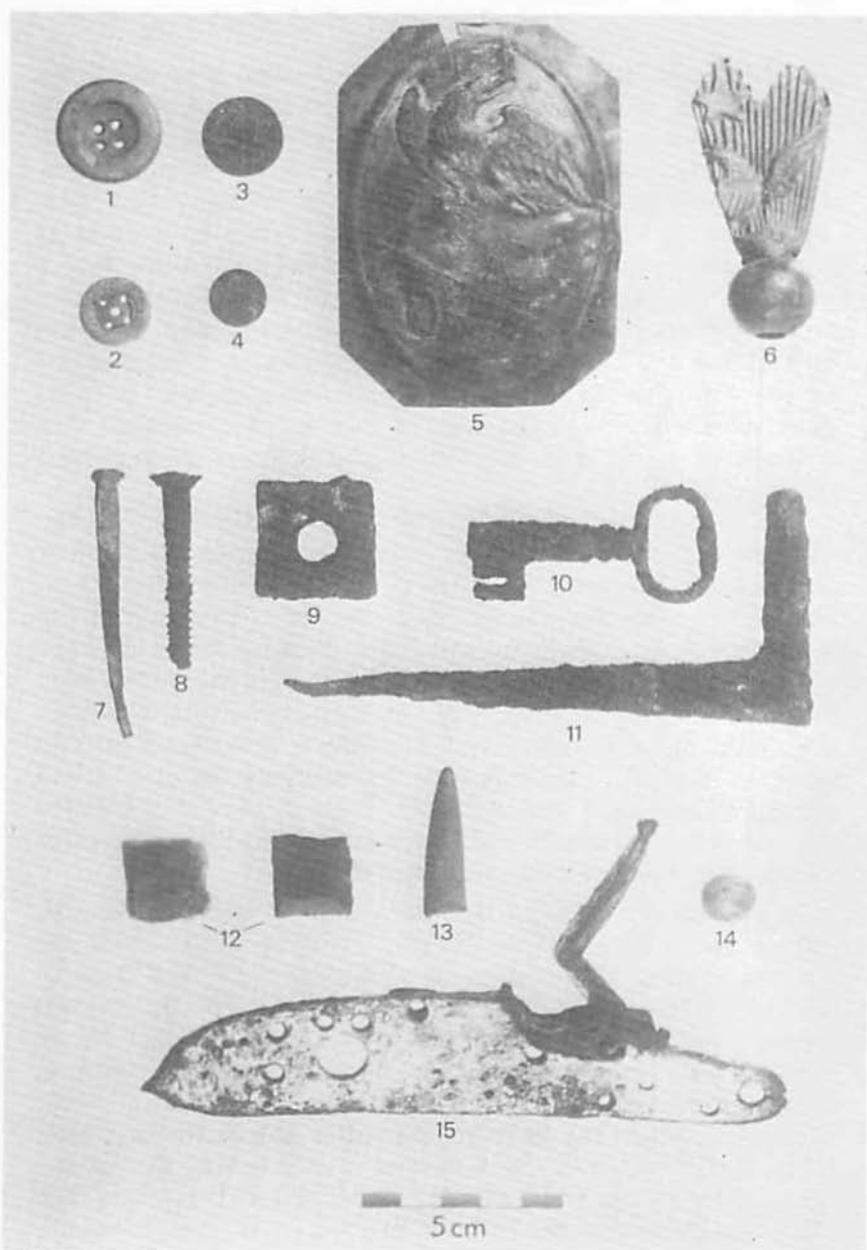
After Wilhelm left Cotes a Kennel, he went to Fort Atkinson and by a circuitous overland route through northeastern Nebraska and central South Dakota reached Fort Recovery and met "Mr. Joshua Pilcher . . . then superintendent of the Missouri Fur Company."²⁵ The Duke soon tired of the post, complaining that there was "so little that was worth seeing." On August 29 he left by boat accompanied by seven other people, including a Mr. Leclerc, who, according to Wilhelm, was Pilcher's assistant.²⁶ They traveled down river to Council Bluffs where Wilhelm prepared for a journey westward to the Pawnee villages. He stated that "Mr. Leclerc wished very much to reach his post at Cotes a Kennel."²⁷

There can be little doubt from this portion of Wilhelm's diary that the post at Cotes a Kennel belonged to the Missouri Fur Company and, from the earlier portion of his diary, that it must have been Bellevue. There is, however, a problem which results from Wilhelm's statement that the post at Cotes a Kennel was owned by the American Fur Company.²⁸ This must have been an error on Wilhelm's part, since he has firmly established the connection between the post and Pilcher's Missouri Company (see footnotes 25 and 26). There is also no evidence that the American Company had a post anywhere in the vicinity of Bellevue in 1823; but seven years later, when Wilhelm made his second trip up the Missouri, the Bellevue station was closely aligned with the American Company. There are several statements in this journal which show that he added information which was gained during the later expedition. The statement that the Cotes a Kennel post belonged to the American Fur Company seems to have been one of these additions.

Wilhelm's journal leaves no doubt that a trading post or factory at Bellevue was operational by June of 1823. Evidence from James, Meriweather, and Bell suggests that it was not there



Artifacts recovered from the archeological investigations at the Bellevue trading post site include: clay pipe, 1; pocket knife, 2; "china," 3-7; scissors, 8; fork, 9; grinder from coffee mill, 10; table knife, 11.



Bone buttons, 1-2; military buttons, ca. 1808-1821, 3-4; hat plate, ca. 1813-1821, 5; plume holder, 6; nail, 7; screw, 8; bolt, 9; key, 10; pintle, 11; gunflints, 12; powder horn plug, 13; musket ball, 14; musket side plate, ca. 1812, 15.

in 1819 or 1820. If the post was then extant, it seems highly unlikely that all three writers would have failed to mention it. A more precise date for the inception of the post within this span of time rests upon the probable, but not demonstrable, assumption that the Hempstead letter of February 12, 1823, does refer to Bellevue. Since Hempstead refers to it as being "new," perhaps the initial construction occurred prior to the onset of winter in the latter months of 1822 by the excess crew members of the keelboats that reached Franklin, Missouri, on October 19. This would also correspond with the end of one of the most financially successful years the Missouri Fur Company experienced. On the basis of this evidence, coupled with a degree of speculation, the founding of Bellevue seems to have occurred late in 1822.

The period of expansion and relative affluence for the Missouri Fur Company was abruptly ended during the summer of 1823. In May near Priors Fork of the Yellowstone River, one of the company's larger parties of fur trappers under the leadership of Michael E. Immell and Robert Jones was attacked by a Blackfoot war party. Seven men including the leaders were killed. When Pilcher learned of the tragedy, he estimated that the company might have lost \$12,000 in goods and pelts in addition to some of their most trusted trappers. He later revised his estimate upward to \$15,000.²⁹ It was a devastating blow to the company but one it might have survived had it not been for another event which took place later that year.

In the summer of 1823, another company led by William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry fought a bloody battle with the Arikara at their village near the mouth of the Grand River in northern South Dakota.³⁰ The U.S. Army at Fort Atkinson was alerted, and six companies of troops under Colonel Henry Leavenworth set out to chastise the Arikara. Pilcher with an auxiliary force of Sioux Indians accompanied the Leavenworth expedition. When the force arrived at the Arikara towns, a brief battle broke out until the defenders retired behind the protection of dry moats and palisades which ringed the towns. The following morning Leavenworth ordered an artillery bombardment, but this had little effect upon the stoutly build earth- lodges. Leavenworth's next tactic was an unsuccessful attempt at negotiation. The encounter was finally broken off by the Arikara, who left the villages under the cover of darkness.

Pilcher was incensed by the outcome of the Leavenworth expedition. He felt that the Arikara had not been sufficiently punished for the Ashley incident, and he feared that his own trapping parties might suffer at their hands in the future. In response to the situation as he saw it, Pilcher ordered that Fort Vanderburgh be abandoned and burned. This fort was situated many miles above the Arikara villages, and Pilcher felt that it would be especially vulnerable to attack or to a blockade if the Indians made a concerted attempt to seal off traffic on the Missouri River. A short time later the company found it necessary to abandon Fort Recovery as well in order to conserve its dwindling capital.³¹

For all practical purposes the events of 1823 brought an end to the Missouri Fur Company. They had been forced to abandon their posts on the upper Missouri and had suffered a severe loss in men and supplies in the battle with the Blackfoot Indians. Despite these reverses the company was not dissolved until the original contract expired in the fall of 1824.

About this time Pilcher also abandoned Lisa's post at Council Bluffs in favor of the newer quarters at Bellevue. As both Sunder³² and Morgan³³ have suggested, this move was probably prompted by the condition of the older post. The selection of the new site nearly twenty miles away may have been necessary due to a lack of adequate building materials at Council Bluffs. Fort Atkinson had been built almost entirely of native timber, and the construction of this large installation alone would have depleted the timber resources. The lack of timber was also one of the reasons that the Office of Indian Affairs did not re-establish an agency at Council Bluffs in 1832.³⁴

Evidence from the Kennerly diary implies that Lisa's old post was abandoned by April, 1824.³⁵ James Kennerly, sutler at Fort Atkinson, wrote that Pilcher came to Council Bluffs on April 23 to renew his trader's license but was "obliged to go down to his establishment" for additional documents and was not expected to return until the following day. This and other statements in the diary suggest that a round trip from Fort Atkinson to Pilcher's place could not be made with ease in a single day. Since Bellevue was twenty air-line miles from the fort, a round trip in one day would be difficult. Also in the Kennerly diary is the first known recorded use of the name Bellevue.

In 1825 there were two references to Pilcher's fort or trading house at Bellevue. In July of that year, four novice trappers, including James O. Pattie,* spent two weeks at "Pilcher's fort" awaiting the arrival of a keelboat which carried their equipment.³⁶ Although Pattie's estimates of distance were none too accurate, there can be little doubt that he was at Bellevue. He wrote that they left Pilcher and traveled eight miles up the Missouri to Cabanne's. The air-line distance is fifteen miles. From Cabanne's they went six more miles to Fort Atkinson. This estimate is very accurate.

Somewhat more convincing evidence that Pilcher was at Bellevue by 1825 comes from the journal of the Atkinson-O'Fallon expedition. On October 8 part of the group which returned to St. Louis paused briefly at "Mr. Pilcher's, a handsome trading house and out buildings."³⁷ The unknown author of this journal did not log the miles traveled, but rather made a careful record of the number of hours they spent aboard their keelboat. They left Fort Atkinson and reached John Cabanne's American Fur Company post in one and one-half hours. It took them five hours to reach Pilcher's and four more to a camp site for the night eight miles below the Platte. It is evident from this that Pilcher's trading house had been established much nearer the Platte than either Cabanne's or Lisa's and must have been at Bellevue.

In the fall of 1824, the Missouri Fur Company contract expired and the partnership dissolved. Pilcher was deeply in debt, but he was still able to acquire a stock of goods valued at \$3,175.³⁸ Unable to compete with the emerging American Fur Company, he found it necessary to divide the trade with John P. Cabanne, American's representative at Council Bluffs. To insure that the agreement was honored, Cabanne sent Laforce Papin to Bellevue.³⁹ Papin may have continued to live at Bellevue for a number of years. His store is shown on DeSmet's map (see fold-out), and the missionary Samuel Allis, who was at Bellevue after 1834, mentioned him in his narrative.⁴⁰

It was also about this time that Lucien Fontenelle took up

*Pattie's diary gives the year as 1824, but Dale L. Morgan (see note 14, Berry, page 125) states that evidence from the Chouteau manuscripts and Kennerly's diary has "fully established" that Pattie was at Fort Atkinson in 1825.

residence at Bellevue. He was the son of a wealthy New Orleans family, but he ran away in 1816 when he was 16 years old.⁴¹ In one of his own letters, he implied that he was in the fur trade by 1819 in present-day Kansas.⁴² A year later he was working for the Missouri Fur Company at the Omaha villages in northeastern Nebraska.⁴³ The Kennerly diary indicates that he was at Bellevue by 1824,⁴⁴ where, according to Sunder, he "was in charge of the supply room and ledgers."⁴⁵ Fontenelle married an Omaha girl, Me-um-ba-ne or Bright Sun, and they had five children. The Fontenelle name is remembered today largely through Lucien's oldest son Logan, who became an Omaha chief. Lucien was probably the first permanent resident of Bellevue; he died there in 1840.⁴⁶

In July, 1825, Pilcher and Fontenelle formed a partnership with Andrew Drips, Charles Bent, and William Vanderburgh, former employees of the Missouri Fur Company. In September, 1827, they set out on a fur-trapping expedition to the Rocky Mountains, but the venture was not profitable. During the 1828 summer rendezvous in the Green River valley the partnership was disbanded.⁴⁷ There is no known record of how the assets of the company, if any, were divided, but five years later Maximilian mentioned that Fontenelle had purchased the Bellevue post.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, he did not say when the transaction took place, but the rendezvous of 1828 would have been the most logical time. Only Fontenelle and Drips returned to Bellevue, perhaps as partners. Pilcher stayed in the mountains for nearly three more years and then replaced Cabanne at Council Bluffs.⁴⁹ A decade later he was to have had an indirect effect upon the history of Bellevue. Vanderburgh joined the American Fur Company and in 1832 was killed in a skirmish with the Blackfeet.⁵⁰ Bent entered the fur trade in the southwest and later became the first civil governor of New Mexico.⁵¹

When Fontenelle took possession of Bellevue, it was still primarily a trading establishment. Unfortunately there are few descriptions of the everyday activities at a post at this time. Some insight into the operation of a post has been provided in a letter written by Indian Agent John Dougherty, himself a former fur trader. Dougherty was writing about the American Fur Company posts above Council Bluffs in 1831, but his de-

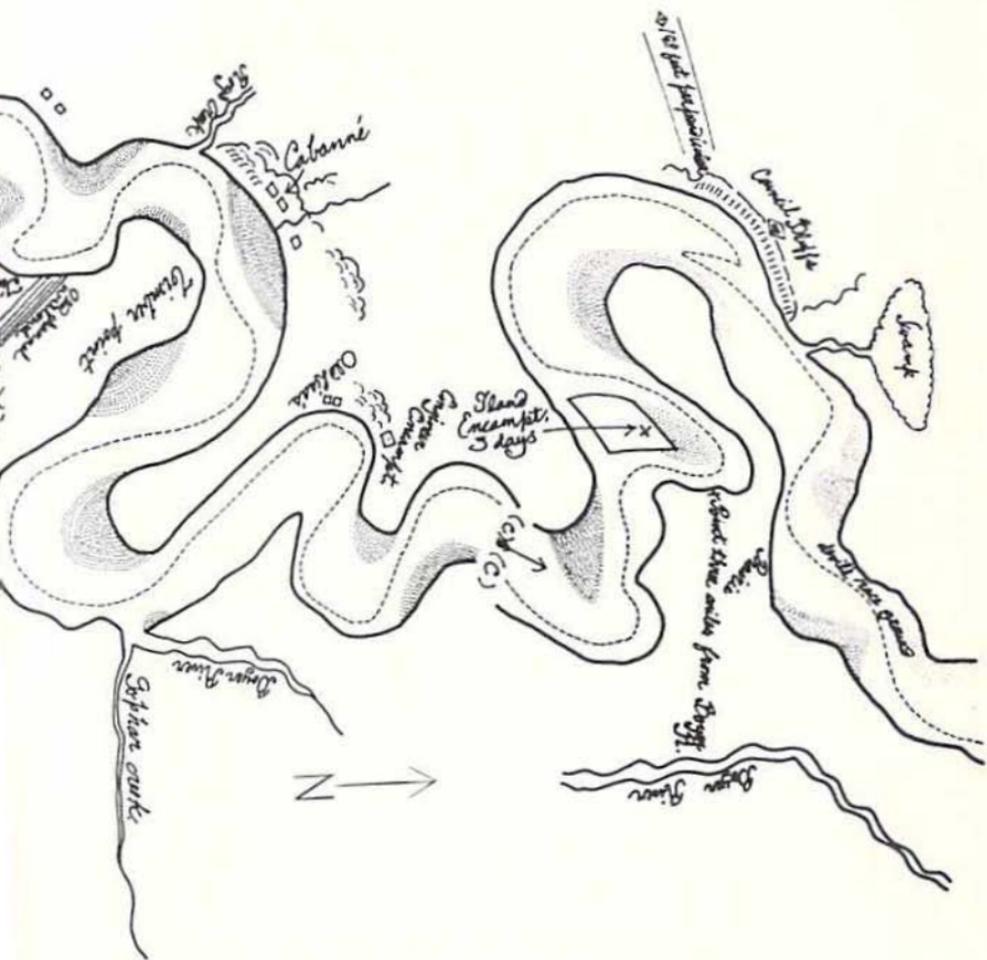
scription could be equally applicable to Bellevue six or seven years earlier:

The number of men employed at and under the control of the several regular establishments perhaps may be estimated at an average of thirty at each – these men are employed in conducting packs of goods to and from the several temporary trading places and likewise in conducting in the furs, Skins and Pelteries and in securing preparing and transporting them by water to St. Louis. Some are likewise employed as expresses and hunting for the purpose of procuring subsistence for the establishment. Having enumerated most of the principal pursuits it is deemed unnecessary to particularize farther; for to give a minute detail of all the multifarious calls and employments attendant on the whole trading operation is deemed almost impracticable.

These men engage for from one and two hundred dollars per Annum. This sum is most commonly discharged in goods at very high prices, and not infrequently considerable portions of it paid off in Whiskey at the rate of from Eight to Sixteen dollars per gallon their principal subsistence at some of the establishments being corn cultivated at the post and at others Chiefly Buffaloe and other meat procured by Hunting. The goods for these trading establishments are taken up in Boats belonging to the Company – which also furnishes one other principal employment for their men; after landing the goods at the respective posts they are hence (or such quantities of them as are needed) transported on horses and mules to the several temporary hiding places. A considerable portion of the provisions consumed by the agents and Clerks of the Company are procured at St. Louis and shipped with the goods. To some of the tribes a part of the goods are sold on Credit; but when thus sold are rated at much higher prices with a view to cover the loss sustained on the part which may remain unpaid in this way it is believed that the traders real loss even should he not collect more than one half of the amount of his credits (which is a very ample allowance) is in the end little or nothing.⁵²

By the end of the 1820's, the trade in furs and buffalo robes was decreasing in direct proportion with the disappearance of the fur-bearing animals on the lower Platte and Missouri; however, the trade was not extinguished for another twenty years. There was also a drastic decrease in the numbers of the larger game animals such as bison and deer, which formerly had been such an important source of food.⁵³ Thus it became necessary to produce domestic foods, and Bellevue began to take on the appearance of a more settled agricultural community. In 1827 Pilcher had complained about the necessity of farming,⁵⁴ but apparently Fontenelle did not share his view. Visitors to Bellevue in the thirties were frequently impressed with the size and quality of the fields and livestock.⁵⁵

Not only was farming a necessity, but in the thirties there was a ready market for any surplus that might be produced. Each year brigades of fur trappers were ascending the Missouri River to the trapping ground in the Rocky Mountains. Bellevue



to Council
Smet Map

became one of the last outfitting stations and supply points on the trek west, and the brigade leaders usually paused here to allow their men and animals to rest. Whether they ascended the Missouri or the Platte, they faced a journey of about two weeks before they reached the buffalo range, the next dependable source of food. Their principal diet during this time was salt pork. Apparently Fontenelle was supplying some of this, for Maximilian reported that he hoped to have a herd of 5,000 swine in a few years.⁵⁶ Fontenelle also raised corn purported to yield one hundred bushels per acre with minimal care.⁵⁷

The young adventurer Warren Angus Ferris accompanied one of these brigades to the mountains in 1830. The caravan was led by Fontenelle and Drips, now employees of the giant American Fur Company, which was beginning to dominate the fur industry. The caravan left St. Louis in February and soon reached its full strength of over forty-five men and one hundred pack animals. Ferris described their arrival at Bellevue as follows:

"Resuming our journey we reached the Missouri on the thirty-first and crossed in a keel boat to Belle Vue, the trading house of Messrs. Fontenelle and Dripps, situate eight miles above the mouth of the Platte. We were here supplied with tents, which we pitched . . . near the Papillon creek, about a mile below the fort. Our horses having become extremely weak and thin from scanty fare and hard usage, were now turned out to graze in fields of gigantic rushes which flourish in great abundance in the woodland bottoms bordering the river."⁵⁸

Four weeks later the brigade left Bellevue for Cabanne's post sixteen miles to the north and then westward up the Platte valley toward the Rocky Mountains, where Ferris spent the next five years.⁵⁹ On his return in 1835, he mentioned that he spent eight days in Bellevue "in consequence of heavy rains."⁶⁰

Fontenelle, however, left the mountains on June 18, 1831.⁶¹ His movements during the next year are not known until Ferris met him again early in August on the Green River.⁶² During this interval, probably in the spring of 1832, he sold his Bellevue station to the United States government for use as the headquarters of the Indian agent to the Omaha, Pawnee, Oto, and Missouri tribes.

Fontenelle then moved a few hundred yards down the Missouri River and built a new home and trading post, which he continued to operate until his death in 1840. During the last decade of his life, Fontenelle made almost yearly trips to the Rocky Mountains for the American Fur Company. He was the

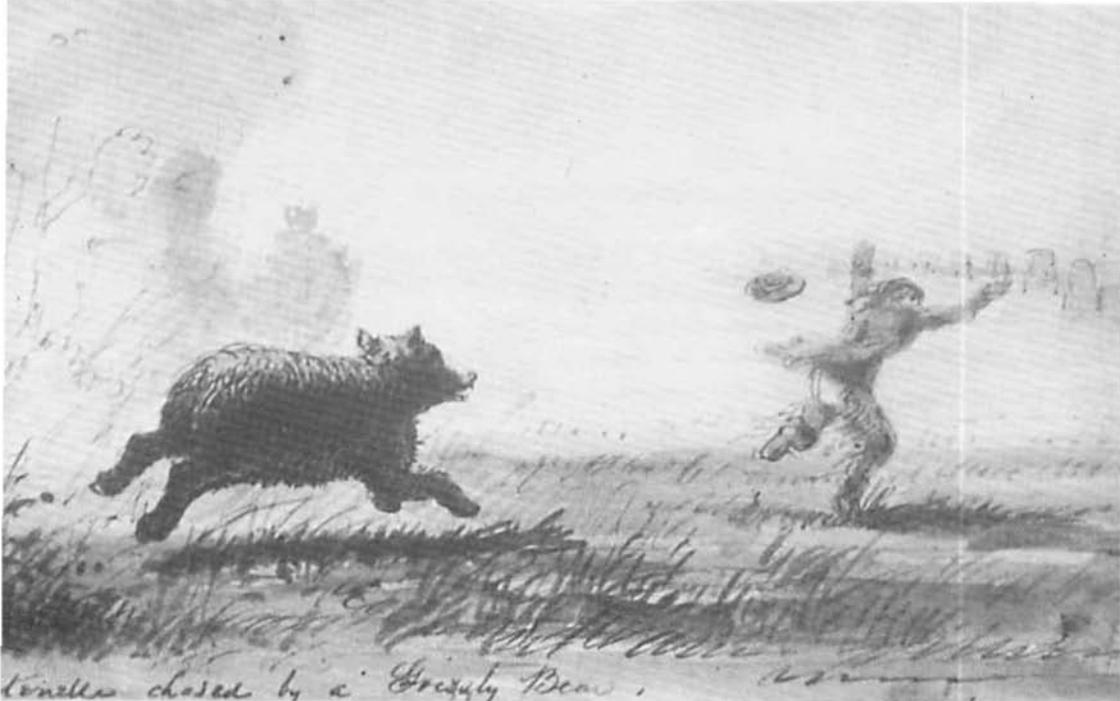
leader of the caravans which brought men and supplies into the mountains and returned with the catch of pelts and robes. On several occasions he wintered in the mountains to hunt and trap. Here Fontenelle came to know men like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, who would become legends but were no more important nor of greater stature during the heyday of the fur trade than was Lucien Fontenelle. Another of Fontenelle's friends was Peter A. Sarpy, whose role in the early history of Bellevue is both cloudy and controversial.

Sarpy's activities were succinctly described in one of the first historical sketches of Bellevue. In 1855 Joseph F. Moffette wrote that Sarpy took charge of an American Fur Company post at Bellevue in 1824, and except for "a few short intervals of absence, the Colonel [Sarpy] has occupied his present post of business at Bellevue for thirty years."⁶³ For this information the author credited D. E. Reed, a Bellevue resident since 1847 and editor of the local newspaper, *Nebraska Palladium*. Reed also published a brief "History of Belleview" in the paper on November 8, 1854.⁶⁴ This unsigned article is essentially the same as the Moffette version. In 1859 C. Chaucer Goss, another Bellevue resident, published the third history, which is remarkably similar to the Moffette version.⁶⁵ Many years later Albert Watkins, Nebraska State Historical Society historian, interviewed Goss' brother and was told that the author was "acquainted with Peter A. Sarpy and that he undoubtedly obtained from him the information about Sarpy."⁶⁶ On the basis of this apparent first-hand source, it is not surprising that many subsequent histories have repeated this data. However, certain contemporary records as well as negative evidence indicates that Sarpy had oversimplified his activities and his movements.

Sarpy is not mentioned in any of the records, correspondence, or journals known to this writer that date from the 1820's. He may have entered the trade in 1824 — he was 19 years old then, an age when many men began their careers in the business — but it is very doubtful that he would have had the experience and ability to head a permanent post at Bellevue or anywhere else. If his career was more or less typical, he would have spent an apprenticeship in one of the more menial and less obvious positions at either a permanent post or with one of the satellite stations at an Indian village. In such a capacity it would not be surprising that he was overlooked by the early journalists.

After 1832 Sarpy's activities are fairly well documented. In October John P. Cabanne, the American Fur Company's trader at Council Bluffs, ordered the illegal seizure of an opposing company's keelboat on the river about 100 miles above Council Bluffs in order to forestall competition in the trade. The boat, owned by the company of Leclerc and Valois, was hijacked and returned to Council Bluffs by a body of American Fur Company employees under the immediate supervision of Peter A. Sarpy.⁶⁷ When Samuel Allis, who came to Bellevue two years later, recounted the incident, he wrote that it occurred "soon after Peter A. Sarpy made his advent into this country."⁶⁸ By June of 1833 both Cabanne and Sarpy had been ordered out of Indian Territory as a result of the affair.⁶⁹ In August of the following year, the order was rescinded, and both men could return if they first applied for a permit from the superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis, but apparently they had not yet done so.⁷⁰

Joshua Pilcher was hired to replace Cabanne and arrived on board the steamboat *Yellowstone* in May of 1833.⁷¹ Pilcher's tenure at Council bluffs was brief, for two years later he accepted a position in the Office of Indian Affairs at an agency on the upper Missouri. He left Council Bluffs aboard the American Fur Company's steamboat *Diana* on June 10, 1835.⁷²⁻⁷³ Pilcher's replacement was Peter Sarpy, but apparently the only reference to this is in error concerning the date that the change took place. Chittenden, in his biography of the famous river pilot Joseph LaBarge wrote: "After a few weeks visit among his friends in St. Louis in the spring of 1834 LaBarge started back on the steamer *Diana* for Cabanne's post. Pilcher was no longer in charge, having been succeeded by Peter A. Sarpy."⁷⁴ Chittenden also stated that LaBarge left the mouth of the Platte for St. Louis about the middle of May of 1834, and therefore he would have been ascending *and* descending the river at the same time.⁷⁵ Although there is some conflict, the preponderance of the evidence suggests that Sarpy took charge in 1835. A year later he was sent to the upper South Platte River, where he built Fort Jackson. John E. Wickman, Sarpy's best biographer, contends that Sarpy returned to "Fort Bellevue" in the spring of 1838.⁷⁶ In the opinion of this writer, Wickman was only slightly off the mark. Sarpy may instead have spent the next two years at a less



The only known picture of Lucien Fontenelle is this water color by Alfred Jacob Miller, done in the Rocky Mountains in 1837 and entitled "Fontenelle Chased by Grizzly Bear." (Courtesy of Northern Natural Gas Company, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha)

permanent post about ten miles to the north. This assumption is based upon Father DeSmet's map, probably drawn in 1838 or 1839 when DeSmet was at the Potawatomi mission near present-day Council Bluffs. This map shows "Sarpy's St." on the west bank of the Missouri, approximately midway between Bellevue and old Council Bluffs. Sarpy's move to Bellevue occurred in 1840 or a little later according to a statement by Henry Fontenelle (Lucien's son): "My Father died [in 1840] in Bellevue in the trading post he built, afterwards occupied by Peter A. Sarpy."⁷⁷

On the basis of the evidence presently available, it is apparent that Sarpy's role, if any, in Bellevue prior to 1840 was very minor. His importance in the community after this date certainly cannot be denied, for he was a leader in both commerce and politics for more than twenty years.

Although Bellevue was founded as a direct result of the growth and development of the fur trade, its importance was greatly enhanced by the establishment there of the Indian agency for the Pawnee, Omaha, Oto, and Missouri tribes. In 1832 the Office of Indian Affairs purchased Fontenelle's old trading post for this purpose. Before this new era in the history of Bellevue is discussed, it will be necessary to go back in time and review the events which led to the sale of the post.

THE AGENCY ERA

In 1819 Benjamin O'Fallon received his official appointment as Indian agent for the Upper Missouri Agency headquartered at Cantonment Missouri, later replaced by Fort Atkinson, at old Council Bluffs. He served until 1826, when ill health forced him to submit his resignation to his superior, Secretary of War James Barbour.⁷⁸ In April of the next year, his sub-agent John Dougherty accepted appointment to the position.⁷⁹

Dougherty came to the upper Missouri country in 1809 with Manuel Lisa. He worked for the company for ten years and then was hired by the Office of Indian Affairs, first as an interpreter on the Yellowstone Expedition. Dougherty's career in the office spanned a period of twenty years.⁸⁰ Although he was criticized for frequent absence from his assigned station, his ability far outweighed this fault. It is obvious from his letters that he was sincerely concerned about the welfare of the Indians in his agency. He foresaw the end of the buffalo hunts, so important to Indian economy, and tried to persuade them to take up farming and cattle raising.

In 1827 the military abandoned Fort Atkinson and moved down the Missouri River to a new site later named Fort Leavenworth and located opposite the mouth of the Little Platte River. Colonel Henry Leavenworth reported the move and described the new location. He goes on to state, "There will be no doubt be very soon many tribes of Indians to visit this new post, and if not inconsistent with the views of the government I should be happy to have Mr. Dougherty (Indian Agent recently established at Council Bluffs) ordered to this new post."⁸¹ On August 25, 1827, Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark ordered Dougherty to change his location "from the Council Bluffs to the new military post near the Little Platte River until the end of the year 1828."⁸² Dougherty must have been happy to comply, for it is clear from numerous statements in his letters that he did not favor the Council Bluffs location. Clark did favor Council Bluffs, for on June 3, 1829, he wrote to Dougherty: "It is deemed necessary under the present state of our Indian relations on the Missouri that you keep your Agency nearer the Territories claimed by the Tribes for which you are Agent. You will therefore please take your station at your old post at the

Council Bluffs.”⁸³ Dougherty countered with a long letter to Secretary of War John Eaton pointing out the disadvantages of the Council Bluffs location. This seems to have had the desired effect, at least temporarily, for there is no further correspondence on the matter for nearly two years.⁸⁴ In a letter dated December 7, 1831, from Clark to Secretary of War Lewis Cass the entire situation is summarized. Clark discussed the establishment of the agency at Council Bluffs in 1819 and wrote:

There would probably have been no objection to its remaining if the Agent had not preferred a situation considered less exposed. Other causes likewise induced him on the abandonment of Council Bluffs by the troops in 1827 to give Cantonment Leavenworth the preference, and to impress the Department with the belief that he could be of more service at the latter than at the former place.⁸⁵

Clark concluded by assuring Cass that he had always favored the Council Bluffs location. By this time Dougherty must have decided that further refusal to remove the agency from Fort Leavenworth would be unwise. It was probably in the spring of 1832 that Dougherty traveled up the Missouri to find a suitable location for the agency. He described his activities in the following letter to William Clark:

In obedience to your order under date of the 17th February last assigning Council Bluffs as the place of location for the Upper Missouri Agency and directing me to take post at that point or at some point near that place and above the Big River Platte in the event of there not being a sufficiency of building materials or timber for the use and convenience of the Agency at Council Bluffs, I took measures at an early period to carry your views into effect. On examination, it was found that not a sufficiency of building materials or timber could be procured at that place; consequently I availed myself of the discretion given to locate near that place and above the Big River Platte and selected as the most suitable (in every point of view) a place about nine miles above the Platte and twenty below the Bluffs. Not among the least of the reasons, which induced me to make this selection were the ones, that at this point, I found erected of good materials an ample number of houses, well constructed for all the uses of the Agency; and that they could be purchased for a much less amount that would be required so remote from the white settlement to build suitable ones for the Agency – I therefore purchased of the owner (Mr. Fontenelle) the entire establishment for the price (as you will see from my accounts) of \$1000 – The purchase of all the houses, being entire for the sum of \$1000.⁸⁶

Unfortunately Dougherty did not date this letter but on the back is the notation “Recd. Sept. 20, 1832.” The exact date of the transaction is unknown, but it would probably have occurred before Fontenelle left for the mountains, perhaps in March or April.

This new evidence from the letters of Clark and Dougherty makes it clear that the agency was not established in Bellevue until 1832. This is contrary to most previous histories in which



Andrew Drips (left), an early Bellevue resident and close friend of Fontenelle. . . . Samuel Allis, missionary to the Pawnee and frequent visitor at Bellevue after 1834.

the date of 1823 has been given. The earliest reference this writer has found on this point was in an article entitled "History of Bellevue" published on November 8, 1854, in the *Nebraska Palladium*, a newspaper printed in Bellevue.⁸⁷ Although the article is unsigned, it may have been written by the owner and editor of the paper, D. E. Reed. The article stated, "In the year 1823, the United States Government established an Indian Agency at this place, styled the 'Council Bluffs Indian Agency', which is still continued." Perhaps the author was misinformed, or perhaps the last two digits of the date were transposed. Whatever the reason may have been, the date of 1823 cannot be supported by contemporary evidence. In 1823 one of the major concerns of the Indian agent was the construction of a council house at Fort Atkinson.⁸⁸ There is no mention of an impending or proposed move in either the Fort Atkinson order books or the agency correspondence until Clark ordered Dougherty to the newly founded Fort Leavenworth in 1827.⁸⁹

After the sale of Bellevue, Fontenelle moved a short distance to the south. Maximilian stated that Fontenelle settled "600 to

800 paces further down the river” and in Maximilian’s map of his travels he indicated both Bellevue and “Fontenelle’s H.”⁹⁰ The Rev. Samuel Parker who was there in 1835 mentioned that the American Fur Company had a fort a “little more than a half mile below the agency.”⁹¹ At this time Fontenelle was working for the American Fur Company and so it is not too difficult to understand Parker’s misconception about the ownership of the post Fontenelle built after he sold the old establishment to the government. Additional information about the location of the new post comes from the diary of Nathaniel Wyeth.⁹² On his return from the Rocky Mountains he passed the Bellevue area on September 23, 1833, and specifically stated that the trading post of Mr. Dripps and Mr. Fontenelle was one-half mile down the Missouri River from the agency. The Presbyterian missionary Samuel Allis and his wife were guests of the Fontenelles during the summer of 1836. Allis wrote: “We live in an upper room of the house of Mr. Fontinell [*sic*] ½ mile south of Bellevue where we have all the comforts of life that are necessary.”⁹³ Dunbar mentioned that in 1834 “a gentleman who is engaged in the fur trade” had an establishment one-half mile below the agency.⁹⁴ This statement probably refers to Fontenelle although his name is not mentioned.

The contemporary statements by Maximilian, Wyeth, and Allis clearly indicate that Fontenelle was a short distance south of the agency. During the course of the archeological excavations at Bellevue, a survey of the surrounding area was conducted. Approximately 2,000 feet south of the site on the edge of the terrace above the flood plain were the obvious remains of a former building or buildings. This may have been Fontenelle’s new home, but until additional investigations are made, the identity of the site is merely a speculation.

Shortly after the Indian agency was established at Bellevue, three prominent travelers visited the area and have left descriptions of it. George Catlin arrived in the summer of 1832 and wrote:

Belle Vue (Plate 122) is a lovely scene on the west bank of the river, about nine miles above the mouth of the Platte, and is the agency of Major Dougherty. . . .

It was a pleasure to see again in this great wilderness, a civilised habitation; and still more pleasant to find it surrounded with corn-fields, and potatoes, with numerous fruit-trees, bending under the weight of their fruit – with pigs and poultry and kine.⁹⁵

On May 3, 1833, Maximilian, Prince of Wied, wrote the following description in his journal:

After passing the sand bank at its mouth of the Platte, we reached in twenty minutes, Papilion Creek, and saw before us the green-wooded chain of hills with the buildings of Belle Vue, the agency of Major Dougherty. . . . At two in the afternoon we reached M. Fontenelle's dwelling, consisting of some buildings, with fine plantations of maize, and verdant wooded hills behind it. A part of the plantations belongs to the government. The prairie extends beyond the hills.

Belle Vue, Mr. Dougherty's post, is agreeably situated. The direction of the river is north-west. Below, on the bank, there are some huts, and on the top the buildings of the agents, where a sub-agent, Major Beauchamp, a blacksmith, and some servants of the company, all lived with their families, who attend to the plantations and affairs of the company. . . . Belle Vue was formerly a trading post of the Missouri Fur Company, on the dissolution of which it was bought by M. Fontenelle, who parted with it to the government, and was appointed to the agency of the Otoes, Omahas, Pawnees, and Joways [Iowas]. M. Fontenelle settled, as I have said, 600 or 800 paces further down the river. Here the Yellow Stone lay to, and we inspected the buildings of the agency, from which there is a very fine view of the river, especially from the summit of the hill, where the cemetery is situated.⁹⁶

In 1832 Congress authorized a commission to visit Pawnee territory in what is now central Nebraska. The primary purpose of the commission was to settle the difficulties which had arisen between the Pawnee and the Oto and the Delaware Indians. The latter tribe had been forced by the federal government to emigrate into the area of the Pawnee and Oto. John Treat Irving, Jr., nephew of the famous author Washington Irving, accompanied the commission as a guest on the journey in 1833. Young Irving wrote the following brief but none too complimentary description of the agency at Bellevue:

The Otoe Agency is situated upon the banks of the Missouri river, at thirty-five miles distance from the Otoe village. It consists of half a dozen rough buildings, tenanted by as rough inhabitants. The most of these are half breed Indians, with full blooded squaws for wives, and an immense number of mongrel children. The latter may be seen from morning till night, lying on the ground in front of the agent's dwelling; and basking in the sunshine.⁹⁷

In 1834 William Marshall Anderson, en route eastward from the Rocky Mountains arrived at Council Bluffs on September 12 and the next day "descended the river to Mr. Fontenelle's Bellevue sixteen miles lower down."⁹⁸ Although he spent nearly a week at Fontenelle's, he did not describe the new post or mention the agency.

The final references to the Bellevue area resulted from the flurry of missionary activity that took place during the mid-1830's. The first missionaries at Bellevue were Moses and Eliza (Wilcox) Merrill. They settled first at Bellevue in September of

1833, and soon opened a school for the Oto children. Two years later the Merrill family moved to a new mission which they built on the north side of the Platte River eight miles southwest of Bellevue. About the same time the Oto built their new earthlodge village nearby. Although the Merrills lived there until Moses's death in 1840, his diary scarcely mentions any incidents at Bellevue.⁹⁹

In October, 1834, Presbyterian missionary, John Dunbar, arrived at Bellevue on his way to the Pawnee villages, where he would be stationed for most of the next twelve years. In his original journal he merely stated that the agency "is situated on a declivity near the river."¹⁰⁰ Dunbar prepared another journal of his experiences with the Pawnee for publication. In this he described Bellevue as follows:

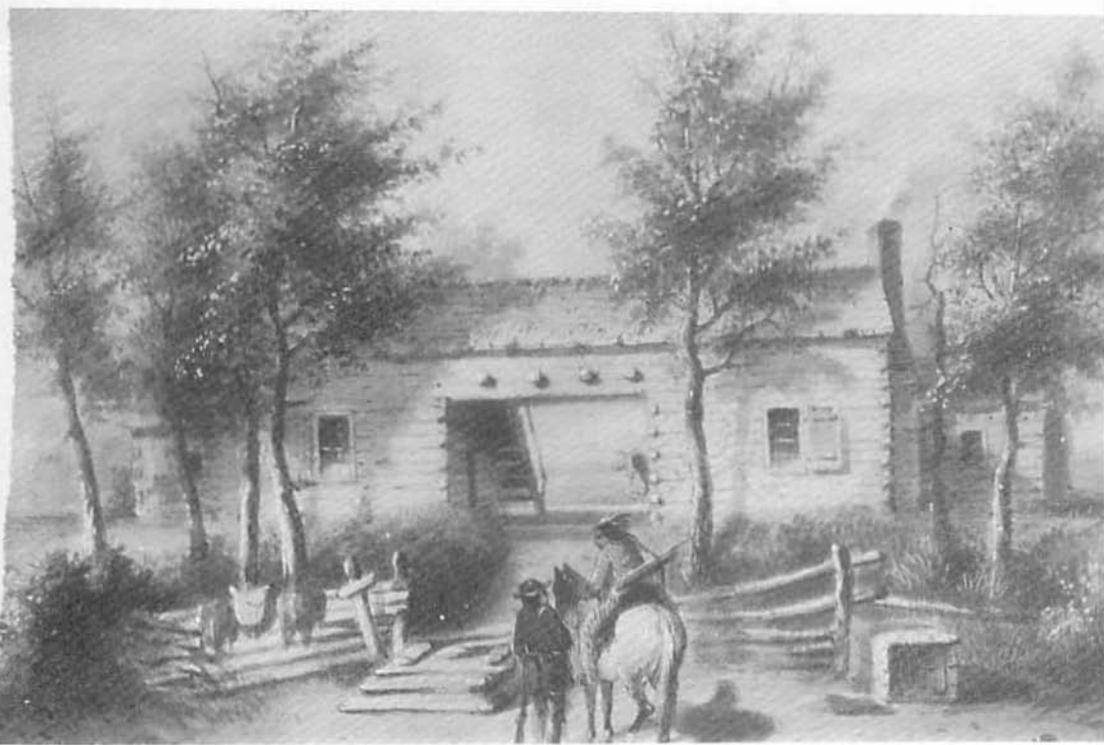
Sept. 22. I started from the Cantonment [Leavenworth], and on the 2d. October reached Bellevue, at that time the seat of the government agency for the Pawnees, Otoes and Omahaws. This place is in the Otoe country, and about 200 miles above Leavenworth on the same side of the Missouri. It is 10 miles above the mouth of the Platte and 20 below the site of the Old fort called Council Bluffs. Here we found Rev. Mr. Merrill, his wife and a female assistant, who had come out in the autumn of 1833 as Missionaries to the Otoes under the patronage of the Baptist Missionary and assistant. The Omahaws have a blacksmith and his assistant stationed at this place. The interpreter for the Otoes and Omahaws then resided here with his family. Half a mile below is the establishment of a gentleman [Fontenelle] who is engaged in the fur trade in the Mountains.¹⁰¹

In 1835 the Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman spent three weeks there waiting for the departure of fur trappers for the Rocky Mountains. They planned to accompany the caravan to the mountains to gather information about missionary work among the Nez Perces and Flathead Indians. During their stay at Bellevue, Parker mentioned the "farming establishments and large numbers of cattle and horses, and a horse power mill for grinding corn" in connection with Fontenelle's post about one-half mile below the agency.¹⁰²

The missionaries were probably less concerned with the appearance of the outpost than they were with the epidemic of cholera which broke out during their visit. Parker stated that three people died¹⁰³ and Dr. Whitman implied the same number of fatalities.¹⁰⁴ On July 16, 1835, a St. Louis newspaper, the *Missouri Republican*, reported that "cholera prevailed at several posts on the [Missouri] river. Ten died of it at Fontenelle's post."¹⁰⁵



Karl Bodmer's "Bellevue," painted in 1833. (Courtesy of the Northern Natural Gas Company Collection, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha) . . . "A Log Cabin on the Western Frontier," painted by Alfred Jacob Miller in 1837. The architectural style of the building is very similar to the agency erected in Bellevue about 1841. (Courtesy of Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore)



This had not been the first epidemic to strike Bellevue. Superintendent Clark reported in a letter of September 3, 1833, that Sub-Agent R. P. Beauchamp died of cholera on August 15 of that year. Other deaths included C. G. Clark, the agency blacksmith, and George Casner and Francis Sanscoucier, the Omaha interpreters.¹⁰⁶

John Dougherty's official tenure as Indian agent at Bellevue was from 1832, when he purchased the post, until his resignation on June 24, 1839.¹⁰⁷ It is obvious from his correspondence that he spent only a fraction of his time at Bellevue, which undoubtedly contributed to the termination of his career in the Office of Indian Affairs. With the death of William Clark in September, 1838, the superintendency of Indian Affairs at St. Louis became available and Dougherty tried to secure the position. His major competitor for the job was Joshua Pilcher — the man who had built the post at Bellevue fifteen years earlier. Dougherty's disadvantageous political affiliation at this time and Pilcher's support from the powerful American Fur Company were also important reasons for the selection of the latter to the post.¹⁰⁸

Having been unsuccessful in his attempt to gain the superintendency, Dougherty submitted his resignation on June 24, 1839,¹⁰⁹ and his successor as agent to the Omaha, Oto, Missouri, and Pawnee, Joseph V. Hamilton, was chosen just eight days later.¹¹⁰ In his first report to Superintendent Pilcher, the new agent wrote that "the Public Buildings at Bellevue are in a shocking condition and certainly cannot be intended to be inhabited by anything else than rats & bugs."¹¹¹ Apparently Indian Affairs was not convinced that the buildings were in "shocking condition," for Hamilton provided his superior with several statements by other Bellevue area residents attesting to the condition of the agency. Pilcher summarized the situation in the following letter dated January 1, 1840:

I have before me a communication from Mr. Hamilton Agent for the Ottos, Mohas & Pawnees, which was received some time since at this office, together with several reports and certificates reflecting the condition of the Agency Buildings at Belle Vue — that is, the Council Bluffs Agency.

I deem it unnecessary to embarrass you with all those statements, and will therefore give only a brief.

Mr. Hamilton assures me that the two hundred dollars authorized to be expended in repairs, or even \$100 [\$1,000?] would not make them habitable, and that it would

be a useless waste of money to attempt repairs. Doctor MaComb when there, was requested by Wm. Hamilton to examine the buildings, and reports them in a state of delapidation, uninhabitable and unhealthy – Captain Gantt, M. Papin, Mr. Robidoux & Mr. Sarpey, were also called upon to examine the place, and have signed a joint certificate, stating the buildings are entirely decayed untenable, and that it would cost more to repair them, than it would to erect new buildings, "in a spot more eligible"; and to those statements I can venture to add my own opinion in their support: for though I have not minutely examined the buildings for the last eighteen months, they were erected under my Superintendency many years ago, and I have a good knowledge of their present condition.¹¹²

Pilcher's remark that "the buildings were erected under my Superintendency" is misleading. He was referring to himself personally and not to the Office of Indian Affairs. In an earlier letter, he was more specific. "Bellevue," he wrote, "was built by myself, near twenty years ago as a Commercial depot. It was purchased by the Government for the Agent for the Mohas (Omahas), Ottoes & Pawnees; it has been permitted to go to run. . . . It is a short distance above the Great River Platte."¹¹³

The testimonies of area residents supplied by Hamilton convinced the Office of Indian Affairs that a new agency was necessary. He contracted with Peter A. Sarpy to erect a new building for the sum of \$1,249.20 and on December 9, 1841, Hamilton reported that it had been "completed agreeably" under the terms of the contract.¹¹⁴

About this same time Hamilton was accused of allowing some of the traders to bring liquor illegally into Indian Territory. He denied the charge and had the support of many Bellevue and Council Bluffs residents, almost all of whom were traders. The details of the case are not clear but by the end of 1841 Hamilton had either been fired or forced to resign.¹¹⁵

Early in April of the following year his replacement, Daniel Miller, arrived in Bellevue and in his first report described the new agency as follows:

The Agency house, a one story building of cottonwood logs, is situated in the Missouri bottom, about three quarters of a mile below the old store house, and about one hundred and fifty yards west of the margin of the River, the rooms are each 17 feet square, within, are seven feet from the floor to the ceiling, each room has two 12 light windows, an entry between the rooms, ten foot wide, with ceiling over head, has folding doors on each side for closing the entry. The porticos are 7 feet 3 inches wide, and are the entire length of both rooms and entry, with good batten doors with locks, the windows had shutters but some of them have been torn off by the Indians and one of them carried away. The roof is good, the doors, windows, celing, and the posts and banisters of the piana [?] have had one coat of white paint. All the work seems to have been done in a plain and sufficiently neat

manner for an Indian country, the lumber of which the floors were laid is scant inch, which is not so good, as thicker lumber, the building is elevated about 11 inches above the natural surface of the earth and has been seated on eight blocks of black walnut of about 16 inches diameter, and the underpinning put under without mortar, there are no chimneys to the building.¹¹⁶

The building was used for approximately fifteen years after which reservations were established for the Omaha in present-day Thurston County and for the Oto and Missouri tribes in present-day Gage County. A few years later the Pawnee settled at their reservation in Nance County.

During the years under discussion in this article the Bellevue agents were responsible for governmental interaction with the four tribes mentioned. During this time government policy was aimed primarily at preparing the way for white settlement with as little difficulty as possible. The Bellevue agents, therefore, attempted to maintain peaceful relations between the tribes in their jurisdiction. In this they were moderately successful, but they were totally ineffectual in curbing the bloody confrontations between these tribes and their long-time enemies, the Sioux, as well as the immigrant Delaware.

In addition to the peace-keeping duties, the agents were responsible for issuing annuity goods in payment for land ceded to the government. The annuities consisted of such items as blankets, guns, powder, kitchen utensils, farming tools, and money, but not all of these goods were received graciously. One issue to the Pawnee included fifty-two plows, of which all but six were sold in disdain within a few days.¹¹⁷ Dougherty estimated the cost of these goods for the year 1839 at \$9,800.¹¹⁸

Another facet of government policy was an attempt to induce the Indians to give up their semi-nomadic way of life and become farmers. In so doing it was thought they could be assimilated into the white cultural patterns. To this end the government provided the tribes with teachers, farmers, blacksmiths, and strikers or smith's helpers. The agents were responsible for the administration of these programs. In 1836 Agent Dougherty had a staff of thirteen people in these capacities with an annual payroll of \$4,940. Salaries ranged from \$240 per year for a striker to \$500 for a teacher. The agent himself received the princely salary of \$1,500.¹¹⁹ By the early 1840's the staff had almost doubled in size with most of the addition going to the Pawnee villages on the Loup River.¹²⁰

SUMMARY

This article has been an attempt to explore the founding and early growth of Bellevue, Nebraska on the basis of some new data and, to a degree, upon a reinterpretation of some older material. In certain instances the result has been a rather radical departure from some earlier presentations. As pointed out in the introduction, this article does not purport to be a final statement, for future research will undoubtedly uncover additional facts that will further clarify and refine the story of these first twenty years.

Bellevue was founded probably during the latter part of 1822 as a field headquarters and trading post of the Missouri Fur Company under the direction of Joshua Pilcher. Two years later financial problems forced a reorganization of the company. It remained under Pilcher's leadership, but one of the new partners was Lucien Fontenelle, who became one of the most prominent leaders of the Rocky Mountain fur trade and probably Bellevue's first permanent resident. The reorganized company struggled along until 1828 when it was disbanded and Fontenelle became the owner of the Bellevue post. In 1832 he sold it to the Office of Indian Affairs and moved to a new location a few hundred yards to the south, where he built a new home and trading post which he maintained until his death in 1840. During the last dozen years of his life, Fontenelle was closely associated with the giant American Fur Company and its predecessors.

Shortly after Fontenelle's death the post was taken over by Peter A. Sarpy. While this man's role in early Bellevue has been subjected to various interpretations, there is no doubt that he was a leader in community business and politics by this time and that he maintained this position for more than twenty years until his retirement.

The transfer of the Indian Agency for the Omaha, Pawnee, Oto, and Missouri to Bellevue in 1832 was an important factor in the outpost's continued development. The Office of Indian Affairs purchased the old Pilcher-Fontenelle post and used it as agency headquarters for about seven years. During this time the agent was John Dougherty. The agency was abandoned, and by 1841 a new structure had been erected about three quarters of

a mile to the south which served as headquarters for numerous agents until after Nebraska became a territory. By the early forties the agency employed about a dozen people who lived with their families at or near Bellevue.

Another less permanent group of Bellevue residents were the contingent of Presbyterian missionaries under John Dunbar. A smaller Baptist mission under Moses Merrill had also been established on the Platte River south of Bellevue. There were undoubtedly a few other people who called Bellevue home, such as employees of the merchants, squatters, or Indian families, but their names have not survived in the historical record.

When Bellevue reached its twentieth anniversary in 1842, it was experiencing a period of relative calm. The fur trade was on the decline, and the days when Bellevue served as the "jumping-off place" for the brigades of trappers bound for the Rockies were gone. Dunbar's missionaries, and many agency employees moved to the Pawnee village, and with Merrill's death the Baptist station was abandoned. During the last half of the decade there was a resurgence of missionary activity and the arrival of Mormon immigrants and other settlers bound for Oregon and California which opened another vigorous chapter in Bellevue's history. Its renewed growth and increasing importance nearly resulted in its selection as the territorial capital. These events, however, occurred during the years which led to the establishment of Nebraska as a territory and are another chapter in the complex and fascinating history of the state's oldest community.

NOTES

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