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Article Summary: In 1861 Oto and Missouriia Indians arrived in Nebraska City to demand annuity payments promised to them by treaty. Indian Agent Dennison refused them money or food, then disappeared, fleeing to the Confederacy. Had he embezzled their money?

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Photographs / Images: Arkeketah, longtime Oto leader; Agent William Wallace Denison's Nebraska City home as it looked in the 1970s

THE OTO, MISSOURIA, AND AGENT DENNISON

By Richard E. Jensen

In February of 1861, the citizens of Nebraska City found themselves in a dilemma not of their own making, which had potential for violence. A large delegation of Oto and Missouri Indians were in town angrily demanding the annuity payments granted to them by the Treaty of 1854. The citizens of the Missouri River town did not wish to fight the irate Indians motivated by their destitute condition. In spite of the impending trouble, Indian Agent William Wallace Dennison stubbornly refused to give the Indians either food or money. These actions and the agent's subsequent disappearance resulted in a rumor that he had stolen the money and had fled to the Confederacy.

The Oto and Missouri were closely related tribes who had been living near the confluence of the Platte with the Missouri River for over a century. Since the Missouri was the major artery of transportation across the Plains for the early explorers and fur traders, the Oto and Missouri had had a long time to learn about, and become accustomed to, the strange ways of these foreigners. For the most part, the relationship was amiable enough, although the Oto-Missouria did have a reputation for treachery when influenced by the skull-popping whiskey sold by some of the fur traders.

When the United States government created the Nebraska Territory in 1854, the Oto-Missouria agreed to move to a reservation and give up claims to any other land. While they might not have been happy about this arrangement, they realized the power of the Americans and knew, if they refused, they had nowhere to go but west. There they would have to confront their traditional enemies, who had more manpower, more horses, and more guns. Their friends the Pawnee, once lords of the plains, and the Omaha were declining powers with problems of their own and would be of no help.

The Oto-Missouria accepted a reservation of 250 square miles in what is now southern Gage County, Nebraska, and northern Marshall County, Kansas. In addition, they were to receive



Arkeketah, longtime Oto leader, in 1861 led a delegation of his people to Nebraska City to demand their 1860 annuity money.

\$420,000 over a period of forty one years. Thirteen thousand dollars per year was earmarked for the period being considered here. The government also promised to set up an agency on the reservation to administer these funds, adjudicate disputes between the Indians and the whites and, most importantly, guide the Indians in white ways.¹ The ultimate goal of the Office of Indian Affairs at that time was to change the Indian into an independent small farmer indistinguishable from his white counterpart, then the backbone of the nation.

Three agents were hired during the first three years of the reservation, each more ineffectual than the other.² Finally William Wallace Dennison from South Carolina was appointed and by May, 1857, he was on duty.³ At first he appeared to be hard working and dedicated—the right man in the right job. Dennison hired a farmer to break sod and to instruct the Indians in modern farming techniques. There was also a blacksmith to keep all of the white man's mechanical contrivances in working order.⁴ Before long he had a grist mill in operation which greatly decreased the work load of the Indian women, who previously had had to grind corn, a staple of their diet, between two rocks. The mill also served as a saw mill which turned out planks to build houses for the miller, blacksmith, farmer and the agent.⁵ It was also hoped that the Indians would give up their earthlodges and wigwams and build "white" houses.⁶

Although the Oto and Missouriia had moved to a reservation they continued to live their traditional life style. In the spring the gardens of corn, beans, and squash were planted in the Blue River bottom lands near the village. After the plants were up and cultivated, the Indians went on the summer buffalo hunt, usually in north-central Kansas. This lasted until the corn began to ripen, at which time they returned for the fall harvest. A second hunt lasting about eight weeks began early in November.⁷ These customs had been going on for generations.

One of Agent Dennison's duties was to try to break down this semi-nomadic lifestyle in favor of permanent residency in the village, so more time could be devoted to crops. In the spring of 1860, he accomplished a near miracle, when he convinced the Indians, for the first time in memory, to forgo the summer hunt in favor of farming.⁸ This decision did not result entirely from Dennison's influence, for their enemies, the more numerous Cheyenne, had been giving the Oto-Missouria more trouble during recent hunts than they cared to face.⁹

In the spring Dennison's letters to his superior, Superintendent of Indian Affairs A. M. Robinson, were full of confidence and pride in his success. With the help of the government farmer, 250 acres of corn plus fields of oats, potatoes and turnips were planted. In an average year this would provide a surplus to be sold for a nice profit.¹⁰ During June, July, and August, Dennison's correspondence was reduced to the barest bureaucratic necessities until he submitted a report on September 5. After a rambling two page introduction he got to the point. "The entire deprivation of rain for three long months" he wrote, had caused the Oto and Missouriia to be "bowed and humiliated with grief and sadness at the entire loss of their crop."¹¹

Dennison's assessment of the Oto and Missouriia's humiliation was probably correct, but for the wrong reasons. They had broken a tradition of such long duration that it had become interwoven with their religion. The break was done, in part, on the advice of a white man and the result was a disaster so complete that starvation during the coming winter was a distinct possibility. There can be no doubt that to the Oto-Missouria this was a sign to be seriously contemplated. They concluded that the old ways were correct in spite of the Cheyenne. It would be a long time before they would gamble exclusively on farming.

For the part he played in the disaster, Dennison's safety must have been in jeopardy, especially from the more traditionally minded members of Oto society. Prudently, he returned to his Nebraska City home, which he had purchased in 1859.¹² Up to this time, the record indicates that Dennison had been doing an excellent job, but this soon changed. Perhaps an insult or some other incident occurred which turned Dennison against the Indians.

By January of 1861, the Oto and Missouriia were also in serious trouble. The crop failure and the lack of a summer hunt had left them near starvation. The chiefs of the tribe wrote an impassioned letter to Superintendent Robinson describing their destitute condition. They also claimed that Dennison had not given them their annuity money for 1860, and they requested his removal.¹³ Essentially the same information was contained in a letter from John Whitehead, a merchant who traded with the Indians.¹⁴

The wheels of bureaucracy ground too slowly for the Indians and they decided to take things into their own hands. A delegation of about forty men, under the leadership of

Arkeketah, descended upon Nebraska City demanding their money. Strangely, Dennison refused to turn over the money or even to buy provisions for them. The situation rapidly deteriorated until the citizens of the community were fearful that the Indians would attack and burn the town.¹⁵

On Feb. 20, 1861, Mayor W. Pardee of Nebraska City sent a telegram to Robinson claiming the agent had hidden the annuity money and requesting the superintendent to come to Nebraska Territory and straighten out the mess.¹⁶ Dennison learned of this and sent his own telegram assuring his superior that his presence was unnecessary since a problem did not exist.¹⁷ The next day, however, he again telegraphed Robinson, this time requesting that a company of dragoons be dispatched from Fort Leavenworth to protect government property in Nebraska City.¹⁸

Dennison was probably considering his own safety as well. On February 21 he was confronted by both Indians and whites. The *Nebraska City News* reported the agent had conferred with several of the Oto-Missouria leaders in a room over Hawke and Nuckoll's store. After a lengthy discussion Dennison apparently refused to comply with the Indians' requests for food and money.

The agent then attempted to leave, but the chiefs overpowered him, bound him securely with a rope, and continued the discussion. Finally Dennison was released, though the parley was not over. The Indians and the agent went to the court house where they were joined by a committee of Nebraska City citizens.¹⁹ Dennison later wrote that the committee had the support of a "mob" of 200. Under the circumstances, he finally "submitted so far to the demands of the populace as to place the funds where they formerly were," after retrieving them from his "place of safe keeping."²⁰

Although his correspondence is cryptic, it seems he had hidden the money. Later events show that he was persuaded to deposit \$4,000 in coin in the bank of J. A. Ware, but a sizeable sum remained in his hiding place.

Word of the troubles in Nebraska City reached Territorial Governor Samuel W. Black, who on March 1 and the following day, sent strongly worded telegrams to Superintendent Robinson demanding that the Office of Indian Affairs act at once. A representative of the office, however, was already enroute.²¹ J. Shaw Gregory arrived in Nebraska City to investigate the situation the same day as the governor's second telegram.²²

Undoubtedly the first order of business would have been a conference with Dennison, but to the investigator's surprise he learned that the agent had left town earlier that day. There was a rumor circulating that Dennison had absconded with \$15,000 of the annuity money and was returning to his native South Carolina to support the Confederacy.²³ Gregory made a hurried inspection of the reservation, which convinced him that the Oto-Missouria were indeed starving.²⁴ Upon his return to Nebraska City, Gregory attempted to withdraw some of the annuity money from Ware's bank to buy food, but he was told the vault's locking mechanism was jammed and could not be opened.²⁵ If forced open, the vault would have to be destroyed, and it would cost \$800 for a replacement.²⁶ Investigator Gregory wired Washington for instructions, and after many telegrams were exchanged he was authorized to buy \$1,000 worth of provisions on credit from Kalkman and Wessel, a Nebraska City outfitting firm.²⁷ This solved the immediate problem for the people of Nebraska City, since the placated if not satisfied Indian delegation returned to the reservation.²⁸

Although Dennison's actions, and the accusations hurled against him, placed him in an unflattering light he was not without supporters. The *Nebraska City News* published a letter signed "Pawnee" which claimed the Oto-Missouria had been paid after the 1860 crop failure and the agent was guilty of no wrong-doing.²⁹ Fellow Indian Agent D. V. Vanderslice reported to the superintendent as early as January 17, 1861, that rumors of Dennison's plan to steal the annuity money and flee to the Confederacy were unfounded.³⁰ Dennison himself never mentioned these rumors until his last letter, written in St. Louis on April 17, 1861, in which he stated that he would go to Washington and answer any allegations against him as soon as his health improved.³¹ It is unlikely he did so, for the incident and Dennison's absence were still being discussed in official correspondence three years later.

There is no definite proof that Dennison embezzled the money, but the circumstantial evidence against him is persuasive. Historical evidence of the theft comes from several sources. A letter signed by the Oto-Missouria leaders flatly stated the agent stole the money³² and in separate correspondence two agency employees concurred.³³ In two of Gregory's reports on his inspection trip, he wrote that the people of Nebraska City also believed in Dennison's guilt.³⁴ When the rumor reached



Current view of Agent William Wallace Dennison's Nebraska City home. Modern additions and alterations have changed the appearance.

Washington, John Wilson, attorney for the men who put up Dennison's \$15,000 bond, inquired about the agent's assets and how much of the bond might have to be forfeited.³⁵

More damning evidence comes from the correspondence of John P. Baker, Dennison's replacement. Baker arrived in Nebraska Territory in late April, 1861, and undoubtedly heard all of the accusations from both Indians and whites. He had access to the agency's records and after a hasty audit he reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, William P. Dole, that there was a shortage of \$11,300.³⁶ Baker later made a more thorough examination of the books which showed only \$7,074.03 was missing. He assured the commissioner that this figure was "as near correct as can be arrived at."³⁷

A year after Dennison's abrupt departure from Nebraska City the Office of Indian Affairs finally issued a formal resume of the situation. Thaddeus Stevens, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives, requested information so the committee could plan for the yearly annuity appropriations. Commissioner William P. Dole replied on May 26, 1862, describing Dennison as "late agent for the Otoe and Missouri Indians, defalter for the money of said tribes," who "had abandoned the agency entirely and....joined the Rebel Confederacy." Dole recommended the Indians be paid.³⁸

Had the evidence against Dennison been presented in a court of law at the time, he probably would have been found guilty of embezzlement; however, there is a distinct possibility that, if guilty, he was not motivated by criminal intent, but by patriotism. He was a southerner and by 1863 was employed by the Confederate government at Richmond, Virginia.³⁹ Perhaps he saw his actions as a way to give financial support to the southern cause and at the same time incite the Oto-Missouria to revolt against the Yankees. Certainly such tactics were not uncommon during the Civil War and were praised or condemned depending upon whether a friend or foe was the perpetrator. Whether Dennison was a criminal or a "patriot" will probably never be known. But one thing is certain—he had little time to enjoy the money. He died at Richmond in August of 1863 at the age of 41.⁴⁰

The brunt of the incident fell upon the Oto and Missouria, who had to suffer through the bitter winter of 1860-1861. Their understandable antagonism toward Dennison, and the government in general was inherited by Agent Baker. In 1863, he was still complaining to his superiors that "ever since the failure of the late agent Dennison to pay them their annuity of 1860, they regard every movement of their agent with suspicion and distrust."⁴¹ It would be surprising if the Oto-Missouria reacted in any other way, considering the circumstances. The Office of Indian Affairs undertook to right the wrong but it took time. By February of 1864, Baker was able to report that of the \$13,000 owed the Indians all but \$1,074.03 had been paid⁴² and that too was eventually paid.

NOTES

1. Kappler, Charles J., *Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties*, Vol. II. Washington, DC, 1904, 608-610.
2. National Archives Microfilm Publications, Microcopy No. 234, Roll 652. Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Oto Agency, 1856-1876 (hereafter referred to as Microfilm). J. A. Alston to C. W. Manypenny, October 19, 1856. W. W. Dennison to A. Cumming, July 20, 1857.
3. Microfilm. A. Cumming to G. W. Manypenny, March 17, 1857.
4. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, December 7, 1859.
5. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, December 28, 1859. A sketch of the agency as it appears about 1870 can be found on the cover of *Nebraska History*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 1973.
6. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, February 2, 1860.
7. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, January 3, 1861.
8. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, April 16, 1860 and September 5, 1860.

9. Microfilm. F. J. Marshall to G. W. Manypenny, July 24, 1856.
10. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, September 5, 1860.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Microfilm. W. P. Bennett to W. P. Dole, June 6, 1862.
13. Microfilm. Oto & Missouri Chiefs to A. M. Robinson, January 12, 1861.
14. Microfilm. J. Whitehead to A. M. Robinson, January 24, 1861.
15. Microfilm. D. V. Vanderslice to A. M. Robinson, January 7, 1861 and J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 13, 1861.
16. Microfilm. W. Pardee to A. M. Robinson, February 20, 1861.
17. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, February 20, 1861.
18. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to A. M. Robinson, February 21, 1861.
19. *Nebraska City News*, March 2, 1861, page 2, column 3.
20. Microfilm W.W. Dennison to A.M. Robinson, February 21, 1861.
21. Microfilm. S. W. Black to A. M. Robinson, March 1 & 2, 1861.
22. Microfilm. J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 13, 1861.
23. Microfilm. J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 13, 1861 and J. Lorton to W. P. Dole, March 6, 1861.
24. Microfilm. A. M. Robinson to A. B. Greenwood, March 7, 1861.
25. Microfilm. J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 6, 1861.
26. Microfilm. J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 13, 1861.
27. Microfilm. A. M. Robinson to W. P. Dole, March 9, 1861.
28. *Nebraska City News*, March 16, 1861, page 2.
29. *Nebraska City News*, February 23, 1861, page 2.
30. Microfilm. D. V. Vanderslice to A. M. Robinson, January 17, 1861.
31. Microfilm. W. W. Dennison to W. P. Dole, April 7, 1861.
32. Microfilm. Oto and Missouri Chiefs to "Great Father," June 11, 1861.
33. Microfilm. J. Lorton to W. P. Dole, March 7, 1861 and A. P. Mason to W. P. Dole, no date.
34. Microfilm. J. S. Gregory to A. M. Robinson, March 6 & 13, 1861.
35. Microfilm. J. Wilson to W. P. Dole, April 3, 1861.
36. Microfilm. J. P. Baker to W. P. Dole, March 27, 1862.
37. Microfilm. J. P. Baker to W. P. Dole, February 5, 1864.
38. Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Report Books, 1838-85, Vol. 12, 388-89, W. P. Dole to T. Stevens, May 26, 1862.
39. Dole, Raymond E. *Oto County Pioneers*, 1973, 708 from Otoe County, Nebraska probate record #44.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Microfilm. J. P. Baker to W. P. Dole, January 3, 1863.
42. Microfilm. J. P. Baker to W. P. Dole, February 5, 1864.