Towns were built in Nebraska for many reasons. People settled in new towns, where they built businesses and stores, churches, schools, and homes. Town builders hoped their towns would grow and be good places to live and work. Today there are over 500 towns in Nebraska. Once there were many more. The largest town in Nebraska is Omaha. Its population (the number of people who live there) is nearly 410,000. The smallest town is Gross in Boyd County, which has a population of only two people. What is the population of your town?
A New Territory, New Towns

When the United States government formed Nebraska Territory in 1854, settlers moved across the Missouri River. New towns soon sprang up. Groups of people organized "town companies," which mapped out pieces of land and divided them into streets and lots on which buildings and homes would be built. A map of a town is called a **plat**. Other people were asked to invest in new towns by buying lots, and hopes were high that the towns would become great cities. The people who bought and sold land hoping to make a profit were called **speculators**.

Only a few of the new towns ever became great cities. For some, streets or buildings were never built. These towns existed only on the paper maps which were drawn. They are sometimes called "**paper towns**."

In 1857 a town company laid out a new town called Golden Gate. This is the plat of the town. The smallest rectangles are called **lots**, on which buildings and homes could be built. As the name suggests, promoters hoped this town would be a great and rich city. Golden Gate never became a great city; it can be called a paper town.
Many towns observed holidays with a community-wide celebration. Can you guess what holiday is being celebrated in this town in the early 1900s?
The St. Deroin Town Company offered these certificates, good for two lots in their town. A person could invest in the town of St. Deroin by buying a certificate, which was signed by the president and secretary of the company. Sign your name to this certificate.

Rivers . . .

Many early towns in Nebraska such as Brownville, Omaha, Bellevue, and Nebraska City became busy cities because of their location along the Missouri River. People arrived in these towns to move into the new territory. Steamboats unloaded supplies needed by the new settlers and those traveling farther west. "Omaha City" became the capital of Nebraska Territory.
Plattsmouth, named for the location where the Platte River ends (called the mouth of a river) and joins the Missouri River, was laid out in 1854 by the Plattsmouth Town Company. By the time this photograph was taken in 1872, the town had grown due to its location on the Missouri River and its railroad yards.

Omaha, as the territorial capital, quickly grew into a major Nebraska city. Brick buildings replaced those of wood. In the distance, on a hill, is the territorial capitol building.

John D. Neligh planned a new town on the Elkhorn River in 1873 and built a flour mill. The town was named after him. Today you can visit the Neligh Mill, pictured here in 1885. The mill is open for tours by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Towns were built along other rivers and streams. Here settlers found good land and trees. Sometimes the spot where travelers crossed a river by ferry boat or on a trail was a good place for a town.

On many streams, dams could be built. The water was used to power mill machinery for grinding grain or sawing lumber. Mills brought settlers to town to trade and have their corn and wheat ground. This attracted other businesses. The mill was often the most important business in a new town. Towns which grew because of a mill include Milford, named for a mill built at a ford or river crossing, Norfolk, Seward, and Crete.
... and Rails

As railroads were built in Nebraska, the new rail lines often came before settlers. New towns were laid out along railroads, which helped settlement to spread across the state. Railroad promoters formed land companies which chose locations for new towns on the railroad lines. Officials of the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad formed the Elkhorn Valley Land and Town Company to lay out new towns in northern Nebraska. This company started the town of Wisner, named after a railroad official, and sold lots at an auction. Towns like Holdrege, Hastings, Sidney, and Blair were named after people involved with railroad companies.

As the Burlington Railroad built west from Lincoln in the 1870s, one town company located towns in "A-B-C" order. Starting with "Asylum", named for the state hospital outside Lincoln, these "alphabetical towns" were Berks, Crete, Dorchester, Exeter, Fairmont, Grafton, Harvard, Inland, Juniata, Kenesaw, and Lowell. Some of the towns have disappeared.

In the days before automobiles, towns had to be located close together so that farmers could get supplies and send their crops to market on the railroad. Businesses were attracted to these railroad towns. Town builders tried to get the railroad to pass through their towns, which would help the towns to grow.

Main street of Anselmo about 1909. The railroad is at the far left.

In 1906 the town of Polk was laid out along a railroad which was being built from Stromsburg to Central City. Lots in the new town were sold from this "office," a tent.
Other towns were located by people who came from eastern states. Cozad was named for John Cozad, who led a group of settlers from Ohio. Gibbon was named after an army general by a group called the Soldier's Free Homestead Colony. Many soldiers found homes in Nebraska after the Civil War.

Promises of cheap land which was available to settlers from the government or from the railroads attracted many people to Nebraska from foreign countries. Germans, Czechs, Swedes, and Danes settled in Nebraska. Some named towns to remind them of their homeland: Minden (a town in Germany), Prague (the present capital of the Czech Republic), Gothenburg (a town in Sweden where many of the settlers had once lived), and Dannebrog (named after the flag of Denmark). John J. O'Neill founded the town which carries his name as a location for Irish settlers. He also established other Irish settlements in Holt and Greeley counties.

Other towns were located by people who came from eastern states. Comstock, Nebraska in 1904. W.H. Comstock, founder of the town, is seated in the buggy at the right.

... and Politics

Towns were sometimes established for other reasons. When the state capital was moved from Omaha in 1867, a small town called Lancaster was picked as the new capital site by Governor David Butler, State Auditor John Gillespie, and Secretary of State Thomas P. Kennard. The new capital was renamed Lincoln, and it was the location of the state capital there that made the town grow.
The house Mr. Kennard built in the new capital city of Lincoln (center of photograph), shown here in 1872, can be visited today. It is a museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The place of county government, the county courthouse, was also important to many towns. Often several towns wanted the courthouse. In Knox County, the courthouse was built in a completely new town, called Center, which is located in the "center" of the county. Do you know the name of the town where your county courthouse is located?

In Box Butte County, the courthouse was located in several towns at different times. After an election in 1899, the courthouse was moved on a railroad car from Hemmingford to Alliance.

Here is a riddle: "What is one of Nebraska's oldest towns and also its newest?"

By 1977 the whole town had been moved. Businesses were built on higher ground by the United States government. The 1970s due to rising water from the Missouri River. New houses and businesses were built on higher ground by the United States government. Although it has been a town since 1857, it was moved again in Niobrara.
Sometimes a town's name tells a lot about its history. Do you know where your town's name came from? Was it . . .

(a) named after a person?
(b) named to describe its location?
(c) named after a place in some other state or country?
(d) named from a Native American term?
(e) named for some other reason?

Word Match

1. Speculator a. a place to cross a river.
2. Plat b. someone who buys and sells land hoping to make a profit.
3. Town company c. the location of county government.
4. Ford d. a group that laid out new towns and sold lots.
5. Paper town e. a piece of land in a town where a building could be built.
6. Courthouse f. a map of a town.
7. Lot g. the number of people who live in a town.
8. Population h. a town which was mapped but never really built.