Safeguarding Nebraska’s History

What do we have to lose? The sobering answer: Plenty.
The Nebraska State Historical Society headquarters, a state-owned building at 1500 R Street in Lincoln, houses—and makes available for public use—hundreds of thousands of historic photographs, countless pages of original manuscripts, miles of historic film and microfilm, and thousands of books by Nebraska authors and about the state and the region. And these materials are at risk.

The safety of those who use it. The staff and outside consultants have studied conditions and, for the past decade, have worked to acquire funding for building improvements that will safeguard the collection, the single most complete archive of Nebraska historical materials.

At risk are irreplaceable essential tools for understanding our past and ourselves. A few of its treasures are:

- 3,000 glass-plate negatives of the Solomon Butcher photographs, the nation’s most significant photographic collection documenting the settlement period of American history.
- 318 letters—some 3,000 pages—written by Uriah W. Oblinger and his family documenting their life as Nebraska settlers between 1862 and 1911, which, it has been said, “give voice to Butcher’s photographs.”
- The Ricker Tablets, a collection of handwritten interviews with Indian
Lincoln, February 2007

History is many things to many people—stories about the past; insights about people responding to opportunities and challenges; a guidepost for the future; even pure entertainment. While all understand it is about the past, none want to be bound by the technologies of the past. When we sat in sweltering library carrels, used typewriters, and kept collections records on typed file cards. And the historical resources we worked with slowly deteriorated around us.

None of us would go back. We want the advantages of today’s technology. And that brings me to our lead article: The NSHS headquarters building, on R Street at the north end of Centennial Mall, was built in 1953. Its solid stone architecture communicates that Nebraska’s history is important, well preserved, and stable, but it has not changed significantly from the day it opened. In too many ways it is “of the past,” reflecting the thinking and the building codes of the 1950s. It has no sprinkler system, no approved emergency exits, and limited accommodation for those with mobility challenges. It does not meet fire and life-safety codes or Americans with Disabilities Act codes.

The building houses the State Historical Library and State Archives, including some of Nebraska’s most important historical material. It is also the daily workplace of over thirty staff members, and it serves ten thousand users each year.

Now is the time to bring the headquarters up to standard. We are working with our elected leaders, providing facts and information and explaining the risks of inaction. The NSHS Headquarters, with its historical collections, is a resource for all Nebraskans. It is also the daily workplace of over thirty staff members, and it serves ten thousand users each year.

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The building, designed by Lincoln architect Ellery Davis and built of the same Indiana limestone used for the state capitol building at the opposite end of Lincoln’s Centennial Mall, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It was the source of justifiable pride five decades ago, but it has not kept up with fire, life-safety, and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, putting both its irreplaceable contents and the lives of those who use them in jeopardy.

Nearly ten thousand visitors conduct research or do business in the building annually. It is the primary workplace for more than thirty NSHS staff members. It is literally Nebraska’s home for history, storing historical materials ranging from artifacts of the original Native American occupants to the electronic records of today’s society. Most of these materials are one-of-a-kind items.

The building has four fire and life-safety problem areas, as well as significant access issues. In a letter accompanying a recent inspection report, the Nebraska State Fire Marshal’s office declared, “Any of the violations alone would be cause for concern, but when viewed in total they constitute hazards that must be addressed.”

First, the building has no sprinkler system
or any other automatic means of fire suppression, placing both occupants and historical resource materials at risk.

Second, the building does not have fire-rated hallways and stairwells to provide safe exit from second-floor offices and basement storage areas, workspaces, and offices. All stairwells in the building are open, and those from the basement to the first floor are interior leading only to other interior spaces on the first floor, not to first-floor exit doors. The library stacks (six floors of storage for books, photographs, manuscripts, and other flammable material) do not have adequate emergency exits, and dead-end corridors in the basement also do not meet current code requirements.

Third, the existing heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning system uses hallways, offices, and meeting rooms as return-air passages. Therefore, hallways and stairwells are open, and most office and workroom doors are louvered so that return air can circulate. Those air-movement paths invite fire and smoke to travel unhindered throughout the building.

Fourth, the fire alarm system, emergency lighting, and exit signage are inadequate. The alarm system has too few pull stations; emergency lighting does not fully illuminate escape routes, and exit signs are too few and inadequately lighted.

Finally, access to the building is limited. Inscribed in a marble slab at the entrance are the words, “Here open to all is the history of this people.” But the declaration is not entirely true. People with disabilities do not have the required means of access to the building, and in the event of a fire or other crisis, there is no place where people with limited mobility could seek refuge. The restrooms, which do not meet current accessibility requirements, are a source of continuing difficulty for people with disabilities.

Renovation estimates total about $6.8 million in state funds. The NSHS has sought funding for the project several times in the past decade, but without success. This year Historical Society Director Michael J. Smith and the NSHS Board of Trustees have declared renovation of the headquarters building to be the agency’s top priority. The Society has asked Governor Dave Heineman and members of the Legislative Appropriations Committee for their support of the effort in the 2007–09 Biennial Budget.
Ex-President's death stirs NSHS memories

The death of ex-president Gerald R. Ford, the only U.S. president born in Nebraska, on Tuesday, December 26, 2006, has a special relevance to members and friends of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Although Ford lived in Omaha only briefly, his name lives on at the Nebraska State Historical Society's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center and the City of Omaha's Ford Birthsite Gardens, both at Thirty-second and Woolworth.

Born at that location on July 14, 1913, as Leslie Lynch King, Jr., the infant who would become the 38th president was taken to Illinois by his mother when he was just sixteen days old. Fleeing an abusive marriage, Dorothy Gardner King eventually divorced and moved with her parents to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she met Gerald R. Ford. When they were married her young son was renamed Gerald R. Ford, Jr.

Ford was elected to Congress in 1948, serving in the U.S. House of Representatives until he was named by President Richard Nixon to replace disgraced Vice President Spiro Agnew in 1973. When Nixon resigned in 1974 Ford became president.

Located on President Ford's birthsite, the Nebraska State Historical Society's Ford Conservation Center provides conservation services for museum artifacts, rare books, manuscripts, and photographs. It is one of only about a dozen such facilities in the U.S., and its staff has become nationally known for its expertise.

Paying tribute to Ford, Nebraska State Historical Society Director Michael Smith observed, “the work of the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center helps preserve our rich heritage, a fitting legacy for a president who helped preserve the nation at a time of crisis.”

A brief history of Ford's life, including highlights of his presidency and his visits to Nebraska, is on display at the Ford Center. For information call 402-595-1180 or visit www.nebraskahistory.org.
The Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA) is currently accepting nominations for its Outstanding Educator Awards Program. Any individual, group of educators, or institution that contributes significantly to students’ education about the nineteenth-century westward migrations is eligible for the award. The five award categories are: elementary, middle school or junior high, high school, post-secondary, and museum or institution. Recipients will be honored for work from the 2005–2006 or the 2006–2007 school year. Outstanding Educator Awards will be presented at OCTA’s annual recognition dinner on August 10, 2007, in Gering, Nebraska, during OCTA’s twenty-fifth annual convention, to be held August 5–12. Each award winner will receive $250, a framed certificate, convention registration, and room and board for the night of the awards dinner. The deadline for applications is March 31, 2007. Recipients will be notified by June 2007.

For nomination forms or additional information about the award program write to The Outstanding Educator Awards Program, Oregon-California Trails Association, 524 South Osage Street/P.O. Box 1019, Independence, Missouri 64051-0519; phone: 816-252-2276; fax: 816-836-0989; e-mail: OCTA@indepmo.org.

Nomination forms can be downloaded at www.octa-trails.org/learning_center/index.html, or can be obtained directly from William E. Hill, OCTA Education Awards Chairman, 91 Wood Road, Centereach, N.Y. 11720-1619; phone/fax: 631-585-2592.

January 21
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge *(1962)* Winner of an award at the Cannes Film Festival and an Academy Award, this French film is adapted from the Ambrose Bierce story about the American Civil War.

January 28
Fort Apache *(1948)* Henry Fonda, playing a character modeled on Gen. George Armstrong Custer, leads his command to defeat, ignoring the pragmatic advice provided by the frontier army veteran played by John Wayne.

February 4
The Real Glory *(1939)* Gary Cooper, as an American Marine doctor, staves off insurgents during the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902.

February 11
The Hunt for Poncho Villa *(1993)* Gen. John J. Pershing’s unsuccessful pursuit of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa in 1916 is the focus of this documentary.

February 18
Paths of Glory *(1957)* Kirk Douglas stars as a World War I French officer who believes in treating his soldiers as human beings in this Stanley Kubrick-directed masterpiece.

February 25
Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo *(1944)* Hollywood’s re-creation of the famous Doolittle raid on Japan in 1942 stars Van Johnson and Spencer Tracy.

March 4
The Bridges at Toko-Ri *(1954)* Based on a James Michner book, this film stars William Holden as a jet pilot during the Korean War.

Films will be introduced by NSHS staff and guest experts in Nebraska’s contribution to the war depicted in each film. All films are shown, free of charge, at the Museum of Nebraska History, 15th & P Streets, Lincoln, at 1:30 P.M. Seating is limited.

The series is made possible by a generous gift from the Douglas Theatre Company.
Horses and mules? An unlikely subject for a history conference? Not according to the NSHS Senior Research Historian Jim Potter, chief planner of the Sixth Fort Robinson History Conference scheduled for April 26–28 at historic Fort Robinson State Park near Crawford in northwestern Nebraska.

“Horses and mules were vital to U.S. Army operations in the western landscape,” said Potter, “and, of course, the Plains Indians, the Army’s rivals for control of the West, were great horseman, too.”

The conference will feature presentations on horses and mules in the West. The event will conclude with an address by Robert M. Utley, retired National Park Service chief historian, who will sum up the frontier army’s contributions to the American military tradition.

Tours of Fort Robinson and area historic sites, demonstrations of military and Native American horsemanship and accoutrements, and several social events also will be highlights. Books by noted military historians will be for sale, and several of the authors will be present to personally sign copies.

Presenters will include:

• Lori Cox-Paul, National Archives — Horsing Around: Recreational Use of Horses in the Frontier Army
• John Doerner, National Park Service, Little Bighorn Battlefield — The 7th Cavalry War Horse at Custer’s Last Stand: The Discovery and Archeological Investigation of a Horse Cemetery
• Kermit Edmonds, Missoula, MT — Charles Douglas McMurdo and the Army Veterinary Service
• Emmett Essin III, East Tennessee State University — “They Wore Diamonds”: Pack Mules, Indispensable Logistical Support for the Army
• James A. Hanson, Museum of the Fur Trade — “‘Magic Dogs’: Indian Horses and Horsecar
• Tom Lindmier, Wyoming State Parks/ Historic Sites — The Great Blue Army Wagons
• Douglas C. McChristian, Tucson, AZ — The Best Arms for the Cavalry: The Great Debate
• William McKale, U.S. Cavalry Museum — Twilight of the Cavalry
• Castle McLaughlin, Peabody Museum — Writing Nokota Horses into History

Limited lodging is available in renovated barracks and officers’ quarters now used as state park accommodations. The Nebraska State Historical Society’s Fort Robinson Museum is the conference headquarters.

The NSHS and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission cosponsor the conference, which is underwritten with the generous support of donors to the NSHS Foundation.

Conference registration forms are, or soon will be available on the NSHS website, www.nebraskahistory.org, (click “What’s New” and scroll to the conference link) or by calling 1-800-833-6747 or 402-471-3272. Registration deadline is April 9. Space is limited.
January 18 • 12 p.m.
“Reel Weird: Nebraska Oddities and Idiosyncrasies in Moving Images”
Paul Eisloeffel, curator, visual and audio collections, NSHS
Brown Bag Lecture Series
Museum of Nebraska History
15th & P streets, Lincoln 402-471-4754

January 21 • 1:30 p.m.
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

January 28 • 1:30 p.m.
“Fort Apache”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

February 4 • 1:30 p.m.
“The Real Glory”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

February 11 • 2 p.m.
Presentation on Nebraska author, economist, and activist Alvin Johnson
Dr. Steven Shively, NW Missouri State University
Sunday at the Museum Series
John G. Neihardt State Historic Site
306 W. Elm Street, Bancroft
888-777-4667 neihardt@gpcom.net

February 15 • 12 p.m.
“The Nebraska Unicameral: Still Progressive After All These Years”
Charlyne Berens, professor, UN-L College of Journalism and Mass Comunications
Brown Bag Lecture Series
Museum of Nebraska History

February 18 • 1:30 p.m.
“Paths of Glory”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

February 25 • 1:30 p.m.
“Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

March 4 • 1:30 p.m.
“The Bridges at Toko-Ri”
The NSHS Film Series
Museum of Nebraska History

March 11 • 12 p.m.
“This Unsafe Star: Writing and Performing the Emmett Till Story”
Chris Maly, drama instructor, Lincoln High School, and students
Brown Bag Lecture Series
Museum of Nebraska History

March 18 • 2 p.m.
Presentation on Standing Bear and Native American rights
Dr. Robert S. Haller, UN-L
Sunday at the Museum Series
John G. Neihardt State Historic Site

Unless otherwise noted, all events are free and open to the public.
From the Collection...  
When Nebraska’s 100th legislature opened in January, few Nebraskans knew that the first and second state legislatures met before Nebraska was a state.

In 1864 Congress authorized Nebraska Territory to form a state government and apply for statehood. In 1866 voters approved a constitution and elected a legislature and state officers.

Unexpectedly, President Andrew Johnson vetoed the Nebraska admission act, but in February 1867 Congress overrode his veto of a second admission act, to take effect if Nebraska’s constitution granted the vote to all men without regard to race or color.

In February 1867 the second state legislature agreed to that condition, and on March 1, 1867, Nebraska became a state.

Opening lines of the journal of the first Nebraska legislature.

NSHS Archives