

The Pre-Territorial Days

In 1803, the United States acquired from France a vast, virtually unknown expanse of land known as the Louisiana Purchase. The following year Lewis and Clark, leading the Corps of Discovery, explored this area at the request of President Thomas Jefferson. The Corps spent several days in what would later become Sarpy County and stopped here again on their return trip.

In the half century between the 1804 Lewis and Clark expedition and the 1854 creation of Nebraska Territory, most of the area which would become the territory was inhabited by numerous tribes of Indians. This whole area was off-limits to non-Indians with three exceptions: the military, the fur traders and the missionaries. These three groups were considered transients and not permanent settlers. Most of the future territory remained vacant land, but what would become Sarpy County was a beehive of activity.

In the 1820s, Lucien Fontenelle and Peter Sarpy were operating trading posts in Bellevue.

In the 1830s, the former Fontenelle Trading Post was purchased by the federal government, and the military operated it as an Indian Agency. Prince Maximilian Von Wied, accompanied by the painter Karl Bodmer, traveled up the Missouri River in 1833 on the steamship Yellowstone. Bodmer painted the Indian Agency while stopping here.

In the 1830s, missionaries began building permanent missions. The first to be established was a Baptist mission, commonly called the Moses Merrill Mission. The purpose was to educate Indian children and to attempt to Christianize them and their elders.

In the 1840s the Presbyterians also founded a mission in what would later become the City of Bellevue. This religious enterprise continued in operation until the formation of Nebraska Territory, when the Indians moved to the Omaha Reservation in northeastern Nebraska Territory.

Other missionaries, including Father DeSmet, a Catholic priest, were active in the area but did not have any permanent establishments.