Nebraska began to mature in the 1880s. While the urban areas of the east had grown during the era of rail construction, the western part of the state had remained sparsely settled. Now immigrants and emigrants flooded into the western areas, and new towns and villages bustled with the economic activity undertaken by farmers who needed tools and seeds and by ranchers who needed ropes and feed. Some of the new population came to engage in selling the seed and tools, but they too needed supplies such as stoves and wagons and buckets. The new population was attracted in part by an advertising campaign jointly undertaken by the State of Nebraska and the railroads who sought to negate the old image of the Great Plains as the “Great American Desert.” But the new residents also came to acquire land – unattainable for many of them in their native lands across Europe or in settled areas of America to the east.

Convinced that settling America’s vast interior would insure the railroads’ profitability, by the 1880s Congress had passed several pieces of legislation that lawmakers hoped would more readily facilitate land acquisition by immigrants and emigrants. The Homestead Act of 1862, the Timber Culture Act of 1873, and the Desert Lands Act of 1877, all permitted the acquisition of sizeable amounts of land by qualified persons who simply paid the filing fees and/or reduced prices per acre of public land. The latter two acts also required the planting of trees or irrigation of some of the land. Additionally, land could be purchased outright for $1.25 an acre. (Land within railroad grants cost double that amount, and only 80 acres could be taken under the Homestead Act.) Collectively, the laws allowed over 119.5 million acres of Nebraska’s public land to be claimed during the 1880s. Across the state, the number of farms increased by more than fifty percent, the Sandhills filled with cattle and ranchers, and twenty-six new counties were organized.

Unusually humid conditions on the western Plains contributed to the success of the ad
campaign. The early 1880s were comparatively “wet” years with above average rainfall. This seemed to affirm the opinion of professional agronomists and the public that “rain follows the plow.” Yet another boost to settlement was the expansion of rail lines. Farmers’ success depended on being able to get their crop to market at harvest time. Ranchers needed to sell their fattened stock to Eastern urban areas, and businessmen needed to receive wares produced in regions to the east. In addition to the Union Pacific and Burlington railroads, nine smaller railroads built tracks that connected to the major lines, doubling the miles of rail track in Nebraska. Collectively, the advertising blitz by the state and the railroads, together with good weather and plenty of moisture, encouraged the influx of immigrants and emigrants who came to seek their fortunes, thereby doubling the state’s population during the 1880s.

Not everyone measured the expanding agricultural sector in terms of harvested crops, the size of cattle herds, the sales of seed and improved farm and ranch equipment, or the value of merchandise in stove and clothing stores. Clergy of all denominations saw the swelling population as an opportunity convert the souls of the newcomers to a variety of Christian creeds. The Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Congregationalists, and the Roman Catholics all sent missionaries who competed for the enrollment of new members. However, after the mid-1880s, few Episcopal missionaries appeared in western Nebraska. Villages and farms remained scattered, and for clergy in all denominations, the travel methods and the time required to reach their flocks across the western part of the state made pastoral work arduous – and often dangerous since in newly-settled areas, bridges across creeks and streams, and infrastructure along rocky outcrops, were often non-existent. While the challenges inherent in the role of a frontier clergyman had been accepted by those called to spread the Gospel before the mid-1870s, by the 1880s, a tremendous dichotomy existed between the
creature comforts of clergy life in eastern Nebraska and the work and living conditions faced by missionaries in the sparsely populated West.

In the Diocese of Nebraska, Rt. Rev. George Worthington, had succeeded Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson as Bishop in February 1885. After a year of pastoral work in the diocese, in his May 1886 address to the annual council, Bishop Worthington commented on the rapid population growth across the state, noting that more missions were needed. But his measure of that expansion was tabulated in the dollars and cents needed for clergy salaries, and in the time needed to move among the scattered pockets of Episcopalians. Between the annual councils of May 1886 and May 1887, the bishop spent a total of eleven days in any part of Nebraska west of Hastings. While he made pastoral visits to most of the churches in the eastern part of the state, there were many weeks in which he did not leave Omaha. Some six weeks in total were spent in Chicago, Detroit (Bishop Worthington’s former home), and Racine, Wisconsin, where the Church had established a seminary in the early 1850s. By May 1887, it was clear that Bishop Worthington preferred the comforts of “Bishopthorpe,” the Omaha home he shared with his brother, to the rigors of travel among members of his flock. A year later at the May 1888 annual council, the bishop’s defenders proposed a resolution to divide the diocese, but due to an overwhelming lack of support, the idea was indefinitely postponed.

By February 1889, the bishop had convinced clergy in both the Northern and Southern Convocations that a division of the diocese was necessary, and a trio of clergy was tapped to craft a resolution to that effect. At the May 1889 council, the committee made their recommendations. They proposed to divide the Diocese of Nebraska, north to south, along county lines just west of the 98th meridian – the generally accepted dividing line between regions with moisture adequate enough to permit farming, and those considered to be too arid to farm. The proposal passed, and the resolution
was forwarded to administrators assembling the agenda for the October 1889 General Convention in New York City. Two of the principal issues recorded in the wording of the General Convention recommendation were that 1) the size of the diocese “was too great a burden for any one man to carry”; and 2) the distances of rail travel “are at times over 500 miles . . . [to] make a single visitation.” Writers of the resolution concluded “it is asking an impossibility to demand of a Bishop thorough work in a jurisdiction like that of Nebraska.”

At the General Convention, the Committee on Admission of New Dioceses was perplexed. Although committee members understood the “pressing need of more Episcopal supervision” as put forth in the resolution, the Constitution of the Church did not permit the territorial division for which Nebraska’s delegates were asking. Approval of the resolution would necessitate disorganization of an organized diocese. And Nebraskans made it clear that they did not want to undertake the constitutional suggestion which was to elect an Assistant Bishop. Doing so would have left the diocese with financial responsibility over the region. Nine days later, on October 18, 1889, Nebraska Chancellor James Mills Woolworth submitted a report that further bolstered the reasoning behind the Nebraskans request to divide the diocese. Ever the litigator, Woolworth’s explanation was accepted by the Committee on Admission of New Dioceses. Convinced that the parishes affected by the proposed division understood the administrative changes and did not object to the split, the committee approved the resolution that defined the western border of the Diocese of Nebraska as the west margins of Knox, Antelope, Boone, Nance, Merrick, Hamilton, Clay and Nuckolls counties. All Nebraska areas west of that line would be part of a missionary district. The House of Bishops approved the plan two days later, and just one day before the General Convention ended, Rev. Anson R. Graves was elected Missionary Bishop of the new missionary district – to be called the Jurisdiction of the Platte.
Rt. Rev. Anson Rogers Graves was consecrated on January 1, 1890, in his home parish of Gethsemane Episcopal Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Reared and educated in the Northeast and Upper Midwest, Rev. Graves was ordained in 1871 by Long Island, New York, Bishop Abraham Newkirk Littlejohn, a close friend of Nebraska Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson. Following a year of European travel, Rev. Graves reported back to Bishop Littlejohn – who strongly recommended to the young priest that he accept a call to Nebraska where the Long Island bishop’s friend, Bishop Clarkson, needed his missionary services. In June 1872, Rev. Graves arrived at St. Luke’s in Plattsmouth, where he remained for the next thirteen months. The young priest found the Plains missionary work among widely scattered communicants arduous and lonely. So given the opportunity, between 1873 and 1890, he left the Great Plains to serve parishes in New England and Minnesota – and he married and had four children. But although nearly two decades had intervened, when Rev. Graves accepted his call as Missionary Bishop, his district remained vast with few settlements of any size; pastoral travel could still be dangerous and lonely. When he arrived in western Nebraska, Bishop Graves found six clergymen, nineteen towns where services were regularly held, twelve chapels or church buildings, and 375 communicants. Almost no missionary work had been done over the preceding five years.

The 1890s were as difficult for Nebraska as the 1880s had been beneficial. The western part of the region – the Platte Jurisdiction – experienced the brunt of a severe drought, exacerbating the dearth of funds available to administer missionary work in the district. Churches received no funds from parishioner contributions – and communicants left the Plains in droves. In 1895, five years into the drought, Bishop Graves estimated that, in his missionary district, ten thousand abandoned soddies could be counted, and that the total population in his district had been reduced by one-third of its 1890 total. The bishop’s estimates were reflected in population statistics for the 1890s; during that decade,
the state lost nearly the same number of residents it had gained in the 1880s. However, what seemed patently unfair to the clergy in western Nebraska was the fact the Diocese of Nebraska had kept almost all of the endowment funds deposited in diocesan coffers. Bishop Graves believed that the value of the moneys was between $30,000 and $60,000. Of those funds, some of which had been donated by individuals in the western counties, the diocese had given only a pittance to the Western District. In May 1891, Bishop Graves attended the annual council for the Diocese of Nebraska held in Omaha where he and three clergymen from the western district presented a memorial requesting a fair distribution of the funds. They also pointed out that the new jurisdiction had no “large commercial town to serve as a strong base . . . for the work of the Church.” It would have been more fair, the petition added, had the diocese been split from east to west along the either side of the Platte River, giving each half a more equal number of strong parishes and commercial centers. But the bishop reported, “we got nothing . . . except some sympathy from two or three of the larger hearted speakers.” Nonetheless, at the end of his first year of work, Bishop Graves reported forty-five places where services were held and over 800 communicants – both statistics had doubled.

Bishop Graves set his administration apart from that of the Diocese of Nebraska almost immediately. While Bishop Worthington had eliminated all women’s pastoral work in the diocese, at his first annual convocation in January 1891, Bishop Graves reported that he had examined the Constitution and Canons of the Church in Nebraska and could find no reason to exclude women from a “full share in our counsels and plans.” He added “I have therefore invited them here . . . to share in all we do.” Of twelve lay delegates in attendance at that first convocation, nine were women. Bishop Graves differentiated his views from those in the diocese to the east again in September 1903. At that time, there was a national push to change the name of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United
States to the American Catholic Church. Supporters, mostly high churchmen, believed the latter name would underscore the *catholic* traditions of the Church, which were carefully defined to assure observers that the Episcopal Church did not practice Romish traditions. Neither did high churchmen see themselves as Protestants in the common sense of the word. In the Diocese of Nebraska, Bishop Arthur Llewellyn Williams was a strong supporter of the name change. While a few clergy in the missionary district supported the idea, Bishop Graves, at the September 1903 annual convocation, said simply, ”I trust the Convention will not devote very much time to its discussion, as we have other work of more importance to us.”

Schools remained extremely important tools for the teaching of democracy and for the recruitment of communicants. Bishop Graves began working to establish the Platte Valley Institute in 1892, although it was not ready to receive students until fall 1893. The drought in the west made financing the school extremely difficult, but it stayed afloat, and ca. 1900 became the Kearney Military Academy. In the fall of 1900, the school received $33,364.65 from the estate of Felix R. Brunot, Chairman of the Board of Indian Commissioners, assuring its longevity. The school closed in 1923.

Because Kearney had been the first community to offer, “in practical form,” land and/or a residence for his use, Bishop Graves chose Kearney as his base of operations. Other offers had came from Hastings and North Platte. And although for the first decade of its existence, the missionary district extended only as far west as the Nebraska border, in 1899, the district was expanded to include eastern Wyoming, becoming the Missionary Jurisdiction of Laramie and adding significant territory to Bishop Graves’ responsibilities. Kearney remained his see city. In 1908, the portion of the territory west of Nebraska was organized as its own missionary district, and the original borders of the district in Nebraska were restored. The name changed again, becoming the Missionary District of Kearney.
early 1910, after two decades of nearly continual pastoral travel, the bishop was tired due to “my advancing age, my failing health,” and at the May convocation, Bishop Graves resigned from his bishopric. However, the church he was leaving on the Plains of western Nebraska was substantially stronger than it had been at his 1890 arrival. By 1910, a total of thirteen clergymen served in his district, and there were sixty-eight places where services were conducted – from parishes with real estate to mission stations that used public spaces for their services. The Kearney Military Academy was doing well, and from original collections to the Episcopate Endowment Fund of $10.25, the bishop had gathered $60,354.15 in permanent endowment funds.

Bishop Graves was succeeded by Rt. Rev. George Allen Beecher, then Dean of Trinity Cathedral. Bishop Beecher had been reared as a Baptist in Kearney, but while still a youngster, a school friend introduced him Rev. Robert W. Oliver, then rector of St. Luke’s. A warm friendship ensued, and when he finished his university education in Lincoln, George Beecher enrolled in the Philadelphia Divinity School. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1892, and after serving at Christ Church in Sidney, and St. Luke’s in Kearney, he was called to become Dean at Trinity Cathedral, assuming that role in January 1905. At the October 1910 General Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, Dean Beecher was elected Missionary Bishop of Kearney, later called the Western Missionary District. He was consecrated on November 30, 1910. The following May, at his first convocation, Bishop Beecher acknowledged the growth of the district under Bishop Graves, but also noted the need to open more mission stations – for which he had no clergy. So the new bishop made a commitment to recruit young Nebraska men for roles as Lay Readers, but he also supported training young women at the Deaconess Training School in Philadelphia to fill the needed community roles. He believed deaconesses would be especially good at meeting women and children in towns where the church was
not well known. Additionally, the bishop did not want to establish churches solely on known transportation routes; he wanted to move the Gospel into regions well away from the railroads. Therefore, he believed rural deaneries would be useful. These were smaller administrative units effective in coordinating missionary efforts where populations were sparse. Clergy and laity in each deanery would be able to conduct services in settlements not served by the church. Within three years, the deaneries had greatly expanded the number of missions in the Western District.

One of the biggest changes made by Bishop Beecher in the district’s administration was moving the see city from Kearney to Hastings. When the original property lease negotiated by Bishop Beecher in Kearney expired in 1913, the vestry of St. Mark’s in Hastings offered the Beechers a house. The bishop accepted the home and moved his family to Hastings, and St. Mark’s began its role as anchor for the Western Missionary District. The house in Kearney was sold, and the proceeds were used, in part, to pay for construction of a new building for St. Luke’s. With the move to Hastings, St. Mark’s became the pro-cathedral for the Western Missionary District. The original St. Mark’s structure was in need of replacement, and in December 1922, the cornerstone for the new (and present) building was laid. Work on the building continued in fits and starts, as money was available, over the next two decades. The imposing building was consecrated in 1941.

Even in the early twentieth century, the Western Missionary District was a huge region in which pastoral work was strenuous, yet Bishop Beecher never shrank from his prairie labors. He had a rancher’s sensibilities. He had been raised at the edge of the Sandhills, and he loved the cast of characters that were part of life on the Great Plains – cowboys, ranchers, Indians, and railroad men. One writer described the bishop’s pastoral role by saying, “At Fort Sidney, he was chaplain to a company of homesick Sioux. . . . Cowboys, too shy to come into church, lined up under the windows . .
and joined lustily in the hymns.” His friends included, Col. William F. Cody, “Buffalo Bill,” with whom he traveled Europe in 1905. Others were a French cardinal, an English archbishop, and an Indian guide. Ever the egalitarian, during his pastoral years, Bishop Beecher distributed food to hungry farmers in the 1890s drought; he mentored juvenile delinquents sent to him by Omaha courts in the early twentieth century; he testified in the Nebraska legislature against passage of a measure that would deny the Japanese immigrants the right to own property after World War I; and as World War II dragged on, he spoke out against what he considered to be illegal actions taken against Japanese immigrants that deprived them of their freedoms and “good name.” But by 1943, Bishop Beecher was tired from the rigors of serving as missionary bishop, but – as he noted – still healthy, and at the annual convocation in May, he announced his intent to retire before January 1, 1944, leaving the future of the missionary district uncertain. But the bishop made it very clear that he preferred to see the western Nebraska area remain a missionary district. However, the General Convention in October 1946 did not concur, and in early 1947 the two regions were again united as one diocese. At the February 1947 annual council of the Diocese of Nebraska, Bishop Beecher wired his colleagues saying:

We are at the score line of a great adventure for God and the Church here in Nebraska . . . , Western Nebraska will stand forth unafraid to accept any challenge her eighty year Mother Diocese may propose.

The challenges presented by the cultural differences between the eastern and western parts of the state, as well as the sparseness of settlements in the west, remain equally as daunting for twenty-first century clergy as Bishop Worthington originally found them in 1886. But Western Nebraska also remains as Bishops Graves and Beecher found it to be: a vast and exquisite space of big skies, open prairie, and a population of communicants and residents seeking to “honor one another and serve the common good.”