The creation of the Missionary District of Niobrara and consecration of Rev. William Hobart Hare as its Bishop in 1873, effectively removed responsibility for the pastoral care of several bands of Indian peoples from clergy residing in the Missionary District of Nebraska and Dakota. The latter district was successor to the Missionary District of the Northwest, and had been under the administration of Nebraska Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson since 1865. Even earlier, when the Missionary District of the Northwest was established in 1859, the native peoples then living in the eastern part of Nebraska Territory had come under the pastoral administration of Bishop Joseph C. Talbot. The natives in Nebraska Territory under Bishop Talbot’s jurisdiction included residents of the Omaha Reservation, the Otoe-Missouria Reservation, and the Pawnee Reservation. Responsibility for their care continued under the leadership of Bishop Clarkson. The story of the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska and its work with native peoples is a long and complicated one – far from complete in the pages that follow; it is told in two parts.

Bishop Clarkson had been consecrated in 1865. Just a year later, a reservation for the Santee Sioux, displaced from their Minnesota homes in 1863, was established along the Niobrara River in the northern part of Nebraska Territory, adding another native group to the trio of tribes already under the mantle of Bishop Clarkson’s benevolence. During the five years that followed, the Church undertook extensive work among the Santee peoples through the missionary efforts of Rev. Samuel Hinman. In the summer of 1872, Bishop Clarkson wrote to the editor of the Spirit of Missions, noting that, “There certainly should be a Bishop for the Indian Missions alone.” A few months earlier at the 1871 General Convention, delegates had agreed to establish a missionary district in Dakota where several additional tribes also had reservations. The new district was to be called the Missionary District of Niobrara, but when no candidate to serve as its Missionary Bishop seemed satisfactory to triennial delegates, attendees decided that Bishop Clarkson should continue his missionary efforts as Bishop of
By mid-1872 however, the Indian Commission of the Board of Missions had concluded that the jurisdiction of the Niobrara Missionary District needed its own resident bishop. Bishop Clarkson concurred, having voiced his view that his work in Nebraska precluded adequate supervision in Dakota. Thus at a Special Session of the House of Bishops, held in New York City’s Trinity Chapel in late October of 1872, Rev. William Hobart Hare was elected to fill the position of Missionary Bishop of the Niobrara. The election occurred on November 1, 1872; Bishop Hare was consecrated on January 9, 1873. Thus, until January 1873, included under the pastoral administration of both Bishops Talbot and Clarkson were natives on the Omaha Reservation, the Yankton Reservation, the Otoe-Missouria Reservation, the Santee Reservation, and the Pawnee Reservation. After 1873, the Santee and Yankton reservations fell under the administration of Bishop Hare. Later in the 1870s, the Diocese of Nebraska began its work on the Ponca Reservation.

Almost all federal Indian policy could be described as one of “gradual evolution,” lacking an overarching policy plan. This was certainly true of reservation policy. The idea of setting aside lands solely for Indian occupation had slowly materialized in the middle decades of the 1800s as Euro-American settlers, their wagon roads, and their railroads encroached on lands long used and claimed by native peoples. However, by the late 1850s, just as the Missionary District of the Northwest was being established by the Episcopal Church, the notion of, and definition for, an Indian reservation was crystalizing. A reservation was created when a band or tribe of Indians exchanged the large tract of land they claimed by “possessory rights of the soil,” for a smaller tract of land onto which the natives were removed with federal assistance. Often the “reserved land” was distant from the tribes’ homelands, and was selected for the Indians because it was undesirable to white settlers for their purposes. The assumption was that on these reservations, the natives would be assimilated into
white culture by learning farming skills and American cultural norms. The needed tools and seed would be acquired through funds from treaty-promised Congressional appropriations. Since the natives were expected to discontinue the traditional hunts that took them off their “reserved” lands, their other daily living needs – everything from bolts of calico and flannel shirts to bacon, meats, and coffee – were to be handed out on a regular basis as annuities. It is important to understand that these goods were purchased with government contracts and paid for with Congressional appropriations – that were not always approved.

There is no historical evidence that any Nebraska or Dakota clergy had a fear of, or prejudice toward, any of the Native Americans within their jurisdictions; they were exceedingly benevolent and empathetic toward the native peoples. For the bishops/administrators, finding the time to visit them in their complicated pastoral schedules, coupled with the clergy’s collective lack of native language skills, was the greatest impediment to visitation. On his first trip into the northern part of his district in mid-1860, Bishop Talbot stopped to see the Yankton on their reservation just north of the Nebraska border. The Yankton Reservation, discussed in conjunction with Dakota Territory, lay along the east side of the Missouri River, and in 1872, was home to some 2,000 Dakota peoples shepherded by Rev. Melancthon Hoyt. Bishop Talbot did not stop at the Omaha Reservation on his first trip north in 1860. The Omaha had sold over 4.9 million acres in 1854 for 17.8 cents per acre; in return they accepted a smaller reservation on soil they had possessed since ca. 1776. The Church had no mission there, and made only infrequent mention of the Omaha Indians. The third aforementioned reservation lay along the Big Blue River in southeast Nebraska Territory. It belonged to the Otoe-Missouria, who had sold nearly 1.1 million acres in 1854, for what amounted to 42.6 cents per acre. Harassment by other Plains Indians kept them from taking their extended buffalo hunts during the rutting seasons of the late 1850s, and drought let to complete failure of their corn crop in 1860. The Church did not
establish a relationship with that tribe because, originally the Otoe-Missouria had a contract with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions to provide a missionary and school, although the agreement lapsed before any school was established.

The fourth group of Indians living within the Diocese of Nebraska were the Pawnee. Traditionally, the Pawnee had lived south of the Platte River where they remained strong and wealthy into the early nineteenth century because of their horse herds. But smallpox in the winter of 1831-1832, decimated the tribe’s population, and they became vulnerable to the growing strength of the Dakota peoples to the north. The trails through southeast Nebraska that connected users to the Oregon Trail passed through Pawnee lands, resulting in several unfortunate incidents with overlanders. The federal government encouraged the Pawnee to move their villages to the north, to a region along the Loup River in present day central Nebraska. They did so reluctantly, and were harassed almost continually by the Dakota. By the 1850s, the tribe had moved further east and established two villages south of the Platte River near present day Omaha. They were then still relatively populous and wealthy with 3,414 individuals and twelve-to-fifteen hundred horses. When the government negotiated its 1854 treaty with the Omaha Indians – which had allowed Nebraska Territory to open to settlement, the Pawnee lands along the Platte River had been included, angering the Pawnee. A separate agreement with the Pawnee was negotiated, and on September 24, 1857, the Pawnee relinquished 9.8 million acres of land for 21.7 cents per acre in the Table Rock Treaty. The reservation lands that they reluctantly accepted were back along the Loup River where they would live at the mercy of the Dakota who were armed by the federal government.

But there was yet another issue with which to grapple. The new reservation lands were then occupied by the Mormons who had established the town of Genoa. Disliked even more than the Native Americans, the Mormons were subsequently pushed out, and so in 1859, the Pawnee claimed
the reservation lands stipulated in their treaty. The land had already been improved by the Mormons with log houses and farmland plowed and ready for planting. Despite that seeming positive, the 1860s were very difficult for the Pawnee. The Dakota attacked frequently, burning Pawnee lodges, killing and scalping Pawnee women, and stealing the tribe’s horses. The people were hungry, afraid to venture into their gardens beyond the village for fear of attack by the Dakota. And the government provided them only a token number of firearms with which to defend themselves. The situation did not improve in the early 1870s. In 1873, on their rut hunt for buffalo in southwest Nebraska, the Dakota attacked the Pawnee who were skinning and cleaning some 800 bison taken in the hunt. Many men, women, and children were killed and their bodies burned by the Dakota. Additionally, the attackers took more than 100 horses – still the measure of wealth by natives on the Great Plains. By mid-1874, the Pawnee people were starving, and late in the year, knowing that they must leave their ancestral lands, sacred sites, and tribal memories, they were removed to a reservation in Oklahoma.

There is no reference to the Pawnee by Bishop Talbot, and none by Bishop Clarkson until 1867. By the summer of 1867, Bishop Clarkson could travel far more comfortably by rail some 400 miles west of Omaha, as far as Julesburg, Colorado. He was thrilled with the prospect of establishing churches along this new path of mass transportation. In fact, the bishop had named a “railroad missionary,” Rev. Samuel Goodale, to visit the rail camps/villages then being established. On Tuesday, June 18th, 1867, Bishop Clarkson and Rev. Goodale, left Omaha on the Union Pacific intending to take the train as far west as they could – rail construction was proceeding at four miles per day. On Thursday, the 20th, the pair reached Columbus, a rail town where they wanted to establish a parish. They held a service in a field, despite “losing some blood, and a little patience” to a hoard of mosquitos. But then they headed west by wagon to the Pawnee Reservation. There the agent had gathered the children into the new manual labor school building so that Bishop Clarkson and Rev.
Goodale could visit with the youngsters. While they were on the reservation, the bishop baptized the son of the agency farmer, Charles H. Whaley.

The 1867 awareness of the Pawnee plight and their very real need for psychological support—let alone spiritual aid—may have come to Bishop Clarkson from Pawnee Indian Agent Daniel Hamilton Wheeler. Wheeler had come to Nebraska in 1856, settling at Plattsmouth. He served in multiple state government roles, including the State Board of Agriculture, clerk of the courts, as well as mayor of Plattsmouth. In July 1865, he had assumed the position of Indian Agent on the Pawnee Reservation where he attempted to improve the obviously bad reservation infrastructure and poor farming conditions. The stable was ready to fall down, and the federally-provided seed planted by the natives was of poor quality; to his credit, Agent Wheeler purchased other seed elsewhere. The stock was inadequate, and both the steam grist and saw mill needed repair. Importantly to the story of the diocese, Daniel Wheeler was an Episcopalian, a member at one time or another of both All Saints and Trinity Cathedral parishes. Bishop Clarkson and his friend Bishop Abraham Newkirk Littlejohn of Long Island, New York, visited the reservation again in September 1867, and the following spring, Rev. Goodale began occasional services on the reservation. His first visit was May 24, 1868. That day, Rev. Goodale baptized nineteen people, ranging from age eight to age twenty-four. There was fine oratory on both sides, but Pawnee Chief Pet-a-la-na-shan spoke a most noteworthy truth, saying, “I have great difficulty in knowing about God, and finding when your Sunday comes. These older children . . . can understand what you teach them. You have more knowledge of God than we, and I want them to do what you say, for you teach right things.”

No additional reports were made by missionaries to the Pawnee Agency before the tribe was removed from Nebraska in late-1874. However, the reservation buildings remained in Genoa after the Indians left, and in 1884, the federal government established a school for Indian children there.
1898, Bishop George Worthington learned that about fifty of the over 300 children at the school were communicants of the Episcopal Church. Because it was a federally funded school, the Church was not permitted to hold services in any of the buildings. Thus in December that year, Bishop Worthington requested donations of $2,000 from parishioners across the state so that a small chapel could be built for the students. The chapel was consecrated as St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church on March 28, 1900. The Church continued to maintain a presence at both St. Andrew’s and the school until 1933, when the school was abandoned, thereby terminating the Diocese of Nebraska’s relationship with Indians in that part of the state. The Pawnee reservation became Nance County in 1879. The Oto-Missouri, with whom the diocese had little relationship, were removed to Oklahoma in 1881. In the mid-twentieth century, both the Pawnee and the Oto-Missouria were awarded substantial additional payments by the Indian Claims Commission for the inadequate value assessed by the federal government on lands taken from them in the mid-nineteenth century. The story of the Nebraska Church’s work with the Santee and Ponca follows in the next chapter.

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