The establishment of Indian reservations in eastern Nebraska, together with their substantial populations and inherent economic issues, taxed the energy of Nebraska Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson. He cared deeply about their humanity, but his lack of language skills and the reservations’ distance from transportation routes complicated his capability to properly minister to their needs. While the bishop had placed good missionaries among the native peoples and trusted in the latter’s expertise, he sought to establish a new missionary district, apart from the Diocese of Nebraska, with its own missionary bishop to properly pastorally care for the natives. The previously discussed Missionary District of Niobrara placed several Nebraska and Dakota tribes under the administration of Bishop William Hobart Hare, but not until 1873. For the first seven years of his missionary work in Nebraska, Bishop Clarkson visited and cared for the Santee and the Ponca Indians, as well was those discussed in the previous chapter. The stories of the Santee Sioux and the Ponca tribes follow.

The historical record of the Santee Sioux before they arrived in Nebraska is a tragic one. The Santee are the fifth tribe of Nebraska Indians pastorally cared for by the Episcopal Church. In 1851, the Wahpeton and Sisseton Dakota peoples had relinquished their lands in southern and western Minnesota Territory, each taking a reservation along one of the region’s major rivers, the Upper Sioux along the Yellow Medicine River and the Lower Sioux along the Minnesota River. The Lower Sioux were not happy with their reservation lands, and after whites began encroaching on their reservation, Sioux leaders signed away another strip of land along the north side of the Minnesota River. The treaties always included the promise of payment for their lands in the form of some cash, as well as annuity goods – items needed to sustain them such as foodstuffs, utensils, and clothing. Such goods were no longer available by traditional means because the Indians were expected to stay on their reserved lands. However, that promise required the federal government to appropriate the funds needed for payment of the cash and for purchase of the annuity items – and often such Congressional
legislation was either late, or in some cases, never approved.

Such was the case for the Minnesota Sioux in 1861 and 1862. The cash annuities expected by the Indians were extremely tardy, their corn crop failed, and the reservation agent refused to release the foodstuffs already on hand at the agency for payment to hungry natives. On August 17, 1862, four hungry Sioux went off the reservation looking for eggs. Needless to say, the egg-hunting expedition mushroomed into what is historically referred to as the “Sioux Uprising.” Over the next thirty-eight days, 450 whites were killed, and 250 were taken prisoner. By September, some 2,000 Indians had been taken into custody. Their trials in a military court were a travesty of justice. Three-hundred-and-three of the natives were sentenced to death. Many of the condemned had only been present on the periphery of any of the battles; one of them even reportedly saved the life of a white woman during the uprising. Rt. Rev. Henry B. Whipple, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, interceded with President Lincoln on behalf of the condemned natives, and on December 6, Lincoln upheld the death sentences for only thirty-nine of the Indians. A huge gallows was hastily built in the center of Mankato, and on December 26, 1862, thirty-eight of the condemned natives were hung en masse. In May 1863, the remainder of the Santee were forced out of Minnesota and placed on very poor land to the west along the east side of the Missouri River – called the Crow Creek Reservation. The Indians remained there for three years, but the environmental situation grew untenable and the Santee were removed again, this time some one hundred sixty miles south to better land in northern Nebraska Territory at the junction of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. Bishop Clarkson was exceedingly pleased, noting that the Santee Sioux were the only tribe to which his diocese had been “able to furnish a Missionary and the Gospel.”

The missionary was Rev. Samuel Dutton Hinman who had gone to Faribault, Minnesota, as a teacher in St. Andrew’s Hall at Seabury Divinity School, founded in 1858. There he met, and later in
1860 married, Mary Ellen Bury. Rev. Hinman became Minnesota Bishop Henry Whipple’s first missionary to the Santee Sioux at the Lower Sioux Agency; they named the mission for St. John the Evangelist. His wife, as well as St. Andrew’s Hall colleague Emily West, formed the mission staff. At the Lower Sioux Agency the trio established a day school, and shortly had enrolled twenty-three students. Rev. Hinman had just begun construction of a small chapel at the site near Morton, Minnesota, when the Sioux Uprising erupted in late 1862. The incomplete structure was burned in the conflict. The Hinmans moved with the Santee to the Crow Creek site in late 1863, and then to the Santee’s Niobrara Reservation in Nebraska Territory in 1866. During that window of time, Rev. Hinman translated the Book of Common Prayer into the Dakota language, and once in Nebraska, he and the Santee natives constructed the Church of the Merciful Savior on the reservation.

In May 1867, Bishop Clarkson visited the reservation, along with Rev. Melancthon Hoyt and another missionary, Rev. Dr. Peter Browne Morrison. Bishop Clarkson was enthralled with the service there, noting “Oh! how I wished that our mumbling and closed mouth city congregations, with their unbent knees, and their proxy singing, could have witnessed” the events. The clergy had gone to the reservation to visit, but also to attend confirmation for Rev. Hinman’s class of new Episcopalians. Their confirmations brought the total number of native communicants to about 300 out of some 1,500 members of the Santee tribe. From 1870 to 1871, the staff of clergy and lay ministers at the Santee Mission dramatically increased; two priests, one diaconal candidate, two deaconesses, and three lay ministers arrived to assist. Among them was Rev. J. Owen Dorsey, well-known ethnologist and linguist. Additionally, Rev. Hinman tutored five native scholars for ordination as Episcopal presbyters. And importantly to the Church, on Christmas Day 1869, Rev. Hinman baptized the first Ponca Indian, thereby initiating the missionary work among that tribe which would be continued by Rev. Dorsey.
The Ponca Indians were originally part of the much larger Dhegiha Sioux peoples that included the historic-era Kansa, Quapaw, Osage, and Omaha tribes. The Omaha and Ponca were driven into this region in the eighteenth century, jointly occupying a large area from western Iowa to eastern South Dakota. All the above named Dhegiha Sioux peoples may well have been clans within the larger group, who split during their period of migration. Likewise, the Ponca and Omaha probably split in the early 1700s, when fur trade records begin to refer to the tribes independently. About 1750, the Ponca established a village near the mouth of the Niobrara River, but led a more nomadic life than did the Omaha or Otoe-Missouria. Just as had the Pawnee, the Ponca were often targets of the Dakota to the north, so in the winter of 1846, they persuaded a small group of the migrating Mormons to camp alongside them at the Niobrara, believing the presence of the Saints would dissuade the Dakota from attacking. By the 1850s, competing interests and jealousies between two Ponca chiefs had split the tribe into two villages. They reunited briefly after the Omaha signed their treaty – the same one that angered the Pawnee. The document permitted the region to be federally organized as a territory, but included in the area sold by the Omaha were the Ponca’s traditional lands that lay between the Aoyway Creek and the Niobrara River.

While the federal government was willing to provide the Ponca with new lands, the restrictions regarding where those lands might be and what payment they would receive only further angered the tribe. Ultimately, the land designated for the Ponca was twenty-five miles further west, along Ponca Creek. The land was of poor quality for farming – the government would no longer permit them to hunt, and the tribe was told that their two villages must live together in one community. Additionally, they were even more vulnerable to depredations by the Brulé (Teton Lakota) peoples. The next decade was brutal for the Ponca. Drought and grasshoppers destroyed their crops most years, and fear of continued attacks by the Brulé kept them close to their village. In 1865, the government agreed to
allow the Ponca to return to their traditional lands, but incredibly when the Great Sioux Reservation was established by the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868, the Ponca Reservation lands were included in those set aside for their enemies, the Dakota (Sioux). When the Church began its mission efforts among the Ponca, they lived in three pauperized villages on the far western end of their reservation (which was then part of the Great Sioux Reservation). Any buildings previously constructed by the federal government – warehouses for annuities, employee housing, or workshops for blacksmiths, implements, etc – were dilapidated.

In mid 1870, Bishop Clarkson asked native presbyter Rev. Paul Mazakute to visit the Ponca every other week. Rev. Mazakute, called Little Paul (Mazakutemani) among the Wahpeton Band of the Santee Dakota, was a fine orator, long known for his desire to maintain peace between his people and the American government. He was one of five natives schooled by Rev. Samuel Hinman and ordained by Bishop Clarkson. After Rev. Mazakute moved a little further west to Bazille River, in June 1871, Rev. Dorsey assumed the role of missionary among the 750 Ponca settled there. Rev. Dorsey was overwhelmed by the poverty he saw among the Ponca. In his reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he wrote that the Indians were virtually naked; the better dressed among them wore only tattered blankets. They were starving and ill with scurvy and scrofula, a form of tuberculosis. Too weak to pose a threat to whites or other Indians, their treaty promised-rations were inadequate or did not arrive. Annuity payments amounted to about $11.50 per Indian per year – enough for one blanket for every two Indians, and $5 per native. Rev. Dorsey sought assistance from deaconesses and lay women expressly to work with the women and girls. His mother, Mrs. Maria Stanforth, served on the reservation for several years. And while Rev. Dorsey was concerned that the Indians learn English and American norms, he also believed that his thirty-six students must “learn to read and write their own tongue.” In the summer of 1872, a large Episcopal chapel was built on the reservation. Here the
positive story of the Ponca and the Episcopal Church terminated. By 1874, depredations by the Brulé Sioux against the Ponca (the Sioux had been given the Ponca lands in the Fort Laramie Treaty) led most white missionaries and teachers to leave the Ponca villages. The Church undertook no missionary activity, although Bishop Hare remained in contact with the Ponca agent. The health of the Ponca continued to decline, but no medical personnel visited either.

The tragic events relating to the Ponca late in the decade are familiar to Nebraskans. In early-April 1877, the tribe was forcibly removed from their northern Nebraska reservation to land in Indian Territory. Generally refusing to leave, most Indians huddled in their lodges and houses, wailing through the night. Their agent E.C. Kemble told the natives they would be shot if they did not leave their Nebraska villages. Averaging only eleven miles per day and trudging through snow, rain, and even a tornado, they arrived on their newly assigned lands in June 1877. By then, all old women and children had died. No preparation for their arrival had been made in Indian Territory; they lived in canvas tipis for a year. In July 1878, after a year on bad land, the Ponca were provided better land 185 miles west of the original reservation. That removal was made in intense heat, but the new lands were significantly better. Forty-five more Ponca had died during that year, including the son of tribal Chief Standing Bear. In January 1879, a small group of Ponca, including Standing Bear, left with the remains of the chief’s son, intending to return his bones for burial in the Ponca homelands. Traveling in four wagons, the small band had only one dollar per day to purchase any needs not provided by generous settlers along the way. In March 1879, they reached the Omaha Reservation, where they stayed to recoup their health. General George Crook soon came to arrest Standing Bear for being off his reservation.

In the trial that followed in Omaha, it was clear that the government intended to return the Indians to their reservation in Indian Territory. They were not an independent people in the eyes of
the American legal system, and therefore ineligible to directly petition the courts themselves. However, two Omaha lawyers, Andrew J. Poppleton and John L. Webster, assisted Standing Bear in preparing a writ of *habeas corpus* to force the courts to acknowledge that Standing Bear was a *man* unlawfully detained with the right to speak in his own defense before the courts. In a well-remembered statement, Standing Bear extended his hand toward the judge saying:

That hand is not the color of yours, but if I pierce it, I shall feel pain. If you pierce your hand, you also feel pain. The blood that will flow from mine will be the same color as yours. I am a man. God made us both.

In *Standing Bear vs. Crook*, Omaha circuit court Judge Elmer Dundy ruled that an Indian is a person before the law, and that Standing Bear had the right to petition the court directly. Judge Dundy also ruled that Standing Bear was independent of his tribe, and as such, he did not have to return to the new tribal reservation lands in Indian Territory. He was released from federal custody. Standing Bear and some of his comrades returned to their old reservation land on the Niobrara and built new homes there. In the summer of 1881, the two Ponca groups formally split, the band in Indian Territory becoming the Southern Ponca. The Dakota peoples who had been given Ponca land in the Fort Laramie Treaty granted the Ponca who returned to Nebraska permission to remain in their village along the Niobrara River; that group became – and remain – the Northern Ponca, although they no longer have a defined reservation. A Ponca sub-agency was established on part of the original Santee Reservation, and in 1896, the Department of the Interior set apart twenty acres of that land for missionary use by the Episcopal Church.

In 1923, the Diocese of Nebraska re-established its mission among the Northern Ponca, in a parish named St. John’s. The mission was headquartered in an old house originally occupied by the blacksmith at the Ponca Agency. A very small, and equally old, chapel was situated nearby. Rev.
Joseph E. Ellis, Priest in Charge at St. Paul’s in Niobrara, served the small congregation. Sometime in early 1923, two area farmers set fire to the house, apparently to maintain the secrecy of their illegal alcohol stills. The chapel remained, but was in poor condition. Rev. Ellis, who also served the congregation at St. Mark’s in Creighton, was determined that the small parish have its own building, and he knew where to find one. One hundred and twenty miles south of the Ponca Agency was Clarks, Nebraska, where St. Paul’s Episcopal Church had been constructed in 1874; it had been closed for many years. Rev. Ellis dismantled the building, and hauled it back to Niobrara where he rebuilt it for use by the St. John’s congregation.

By the 1920s, Indian tribes occupied 14,772 acres of the State of Nebraska. In 1883, boundary lines for the states became the definitive borders of Episcopal jurisdiction over Native Americans, leaving only three Indian congregations in the diocese. One was the previously discussed vocational Government Indian School at Genoa, where in 1900, Bishop George Worthington had overseen construction of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church which remained until the school closed in 1934. The second was the aforementioned St. John’s Mission on the Ponca Reservation. The third small native parish was All Saints’ Mission in Winnebago. Although the Winnebago peoples had lived on land adjoining the Omaha Reservation since the mid-nineteenth century, there had never been any Episcopal missionary activity until early 1914. In November that year, Rev. William M. Purce organized services in a storeroom on the reservation. Within a couple of years, the Indians purchased four lots on which they erected a two-story building for use as a church and school. The second floor became a dormitory for the school matron who served as teacher and aide to the Winnebago women. The boarding school remained successful until 1923, when it was closed; the mission remained active through the 1980s.

The Diocese of Nebraska today has no native congregations. However, the same challenges
resulting from the marginalization and poverty experienced by late-nineteenth century Indian populations are today replicated among people of all races who live in the poorer sections of our cities and towns. Today’s disparity has less to do with language and misunderstood culture than with income and economy. The theological and moral position taken by Rev. Henry Gregory, missionary to the Menominee in the 1830s remains appropriate today. Frustrated by the forceful assimilation policies of the federal government toward Native Americans, in 1837 he wrote:

Does Christianity consist in living in goodly houses? Is piety necessarily connected with European cloth, or the wearing of a hat? . . . The Gospel should . . . be made known to the Indian tribes [people] in every stage of their improvement, . . . even those who happen to live in a country [neighborhood] too poor to tempt the cupidity of the whites [wealthy].”

The answer to his query was the true mission of the Church, and it remains the same.

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