Nebraska City, Nebraska
St. Mary’s Episcopal Church
Organized July 4, 1858

St Mary’s Episcopal Church in Nebraska City, is the oldest, continuously occupied church building in Nebraska. First organized in late-1857, the parish is only a few months younger than that of Trinity Cathedral, organized as Trinity Parish in April 1856. At the time of the parish’s organization, Nebraska City’s townsite adjoined the original site of Fort Kearny, which had been established by Missouri volunteers at the mouth of Table Creek during the Mexican War. The soldiers selected the spot because it was a frequent Missouri River crossing place for emigrants headed to Oregon. In 1848, Fort Kearny had moved west to the western end of the Grand Island in the Platte River where Oregon Trail users needed more assistance, and the site of the original fort was abandoned by the army. However, some of the buildings remained, and the earliest Nebraska City settlers established their homes around the remaining blockhouse. This area, referred to as Kearney Hill, was settled first after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and was incorporated as a city in early 1856. It lay to the southeast of Nebraska City. When the Mormon War began in 1857, the United States Army placed its Quartermaster Depot in Nebraska City because of the town’s proximity to the army’s overland trails to Utah. The town soon became a freighting center and home to commercial freighting firms such as Wells Fargo, Ben Holladay, and Russell, Majors, and Waddell. Through the late-1850s, its economy buzzed with even more momentum than did that of Omaha, surpassing the latter’s population by 1860. Because the overland trails were so accessible from the area, and since travelers arriving by steamship from the East actually reached Nebraska City before they arrived in Omaha, the original four counties south of the Platte River had double the population of the four original counties to the north of that river. The latter area included Douglas County and Omaha City.

Nebraska City’s expanding population made it logical village in which to establish an Episcopal Church. Shortly after Trinity parish was organized, but before any clergy permanently
resided in Nebraska Territory, Iowa Bishop Henry Lee asked Rev. Eli Adams, then living in Davenport, Iowa, to come to the territory to help set up a church in Florence, Nebraska, just north of Omaha and the site of the 1846-1848 Mormon Winter Encampment. Rev. Adams salary was paid in part by Davenport businessman Ebenezer Cook who had invested in Florence. Rev. Adams arrived in Fall 1857, working until late in the year to establish the parish of St. James’ in Florence. When it became apparent that the bustling city on the Missouri’s west bank would be Omaha and not Florence, Bishop Lee asked Rev. Adams to move his efforts south to Nebraska City. Rev. Adams found a substantial number of Episcopalians in the community, as well as others interested in joining the church. Among them were Fleming W. and Ellen Robb, who later helped established Christ Mission in Wyoming, a community just north of Nebraska City. Also living in Nebraska City was the family of Julian Metcalf, a pioneer banker in Otoe County. Julian’s wife was Julia Beatrice Kinney, whose family had arrived in Nebraska City by steamboat in early-summer 1857. In 1928, her daughter, Gertrude Metcalf Sholes, wrote:

My father and mother were inseparably connected with the early history of the diocese and the founding St. Mary’s Parish in Nebraska City, which was named by my mother. She was organist, choir-leader and organizer of social activities fora quarter of a century, and my father was lay-reader, senior vestryman and general facto teuer [sic], carrying out all the responsibilities of the parish on his shoulders whenever we were without a rector.

Our beloved Bishop Clarkson came secretly to us when he began his episcopate. I was the first baby he kissed in his new diocese, and ours became a second home for him. We entertained as house guests a score of bishops from neighboring states at various times and all the clergy of the diocese.

Gertrude added that her parents’ marriage on July 31, 1861, was the first performed in the new parish building. While that fact cannot be verified, St. Mary’s Church structure was completed at about that time.

As was nearly always the case, moneys to construct and furnish the first church building in any
area became the responsibility of the bishop and/or the rector. Because Nebraska Territory was not yet part of any missionary district, the responsibility for fund raising fell to Rev. Eli Adams, who had accepted the call to serve as rector late in 1857 at a salary of $400 annually. Funds to purchase needed building materials and the necessary sacred vessels came from Rev Adams’ friends in the East. Credit for the assistance needed to construct St. Mary’s belongs to Army Quartermaster Major L.F. Martin, a staunch Episcopalian then residing in Nebraska City. Described as a “cultivated man,” Maj. Martin assisted with the construction of the church building by overseeing creation of the architectural plans and supervising the building’s construction. The church’s original site was in the village of Kearney, the original, but by-then abandoned, site of Old Fort Kearny. James Mills Woolworth described the site as “charming,” “beside a beautiful little brook, and surrounded by large trees.” It was, he said, “one of the prettiest rural churches ever built in this state.”

By the time the first building was constructed, Rev. Eli Adams was sixty-three years old; he had been serving as a missionary in frontier regions across the United States since 1827. He energy was flagging, and he reported being periodically “unwell.” On December 21, 1862, Rev. Adams’ wife, Sarah Ann Crocker, died. Her funeral was held at St. Mary’s, but her body was returned to Cleveland, Ohio, for burial. By early the next year, Rev. Adams reported being “too unwell to attend church.” On May 4, 1864, Rev. Adams resigned, returning to Ohio where he lived more comfortably until his death in 1876. His rectorship was followed by that of Rev. Issac Hagar, the first deacon ordained in the territory. Rev. Hagar had been tutored by Rev. Adams.

The population of Nebraska City grew rapidly during the Civil War, and likewise did that of the Episcopal Church. By 1866, the original building was too small, and because the center of Nebraska City had moved north a couple of miles, a new lot was secured in town and, under the rectorship of Rev. Charles H. Rice, the lovely little structure was moved into its new spot and present
location – the northwest corner of Ninth Street and Otoe streets (now First Courso). The building was enlarged to twice its former size. The move and improvements cost about $3,000. On July 1, 1866, the missionary district’s new bishop Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson consecrated the enlarged structure.

The early building was described as being “built of wood and cruciform in shape, with stained glass windows,” although no there is no reference to the windows’ donors or persons they might have memorialized. The building’s present windows, including the east window referred to as the “Bishop Talbot Memorial Window,” were installed in 1916; the original windows were apparently removed at that time. Many of the new windows were donated by the Knights Templars, including the window of the Crucifixion above the Altar. St. Mary’s parishioners have maintained well their list of sacred objects that memorialized early parishioners. The gifts include a white marble font given to the parish in 1866 by the Trinity Sunday School of Washington, D.C. The parish also possesses a prayer book and Bible signed by Lydia Huntley Sigourney, a well-known, nineteenth century writer from Hartford, Connecticut.

In August 1867, Long Island Bishop Abram Newkirk Littlejohn traveled south through Nebraska with his friend, Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson. From Nebraska City, Bishop Littlejohn noted that construction of the Union Pacific Railroad had progressed far enough into the West that the economy of Nebraska City was no longer as prosperous because the railroad was by then carrying the freight formerly transported by the city’s major freighting firms. Despite the challenge that the economic changes presented, the bishop noted that the small parish “exhibits . . . many elements of strength.” He called the congregation “quite musical and intelligent. The musical portion of the service are performed with a fullness and animation that would do credit to many a leading parish at the East.” Despite Bishop Littlejohn’s optimism, the 1870s were difficult for St. Mary’s. The
well-liked rector, Rev. John McNamara, D.D., left the parish to more fully undertake his responsibilities at Nebraska College, the divinity school established on the farm outside Nebraska City that was purchased by Bishop Talbot when he arrived in Nebraska Territory in 1860. After Dr. McNamara left the parish, services were maintained by using licensed lay readers; ordained clergy came occasionally to preach and administer Holy Communion. One of the lay readers, Edwin R. Richardson (later ordained), observed that “The members of St. Mary’s Parish believe that to be out of debt is to be out of danger. They are still somewhat in debt to their late rector, and until they have paid that, they propose to do without a settled minister.” A later writer described the parish as being in “moribund condition” during that period. The Archdeacon of the South Platte, Rev. E.L. Sanford revived the parish later in the decade. In April 1882, St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Nebraska City became the eighth parish in the state to support Bishop Clarkson’s plan to memorialize the diocese’s existing parishes with a clerestory window. Good leadership and dedicated parishioners have kept the parish alive into the twenty-first century.