In the months after Nebraska Territory opened, capitalist visionaries traveled up and down the banks of the Missouri River establishing multiple small communities where they saw a potential for establishing business and industry. Such a location lay some five miles south of the newly established village of Brownville, at the spot where the Little Nemaha River flowed into the Missouri. A late-nineteenth century author described the vision of early resident Dr. Jerome Hoover, who upon reaching the bluff overlooking the site exclaimed:

“Had the God of the universe spent a life-time at the work he could have produced no more beautiful resting place for a city.” Then in his mind’s eye he beheld trains winding up and down the valley, steamboats loading and unloading at the wharf, the smoke arising from numerous manufacturing plants, school buildings, churches, magnificent residences, etc.

Part of Hoover’s vision came to pass. A flour mill was constructed where the Nemaha flows into the Missouri. The merging watercourses created a backwater that flowed rapidly enough to grind grains. Additionally, a public school was built, the post office was established, a newspaper was published, and mercantile businesses set up shop. The town’s proximity to the State of Missouri made the village valuable to abolitionists who set up an Underground Railroad station near Nemaha. In fact, Ossawattamie Brown – the Calvinist lay preacher who organized abolitionist raids into “ Bloody Kansas” – was thought to have recruited Nemaha City women to provide foodstuffs for the African slaves who used the secret trail to escape to freedom in the North. However, although Nemaha was growing and had a seemingly vibrant culture and economy, only the Lutherans and Methodists sent clergy.

Seeking to expand the presence of the Episcopal Church in the West, the 1859 General Convention finally created a new missionary district west of the Missouri River. The Missionary District of the Northwest was approved by convention delegates, and Rt. Rev. Joseph Cruickshank
Talbot of Indiana was consecrated as the district’s first missionary bishop. Bishop Talbot arrived in the territory in April 1860, and as soon as his family was settled, he climbed aboard his buckboard to visit the towns in his new jurisdiction. The bishop’s first trip was to the north along Missouri River trails that took him towards Dakota Territory; he returned from that trip in late-July. A week later, Bishop Talbot headed south towards the border with Kansas Territory, and on September 12th, he stopped in Nemaha City to read services. However, because the winter of 1860-1861 was extremely cold and snowy, and because there were only three missionaries to serve his entire missionary district, it was not until Sunday, April 14, 1861, that the bishop returned to Nemaha City. There at a private home, he administered Holy Communion in the morning, read prayers in the evening, and baptized a total of six children. Upon his return to Nebraska City, Bishop Talbot immediately asked newly ordained Rev. Isaac Hagar to hold monthly services in Nemaha, which the latter initiated on June 2, 1861. The prospects for growth seemed good. The services were very well attended, and arrangements for exclusive use of an existing building as a temporary church structure were secured. In late spring, Rev. Hagar organized a Sunday School which originally had only six or seven students; however, by April of 1862, the school had twenty students. In his October 1862 report, the missionary reported enrollment of thirty-seven students. Mrs. Frederick Holmes, formerly a Connecticut schoolteacher, served as the school’s teacher.

Because church congregations were growing far more quickly than the number of available clergy to serve as rectors or itinerant missionaries, Bishop Talbot licensed Dr. Frederick G. Holmes, formerly of Connecticut, to conduct services as lay reader in Nemaha City. In fact the Holmes were the nucleus of the congregation at Nemaha; the couple had emigrated to Nebraska Territory from Connecticut, and had held regular Sunday services in their home before Bishop Talbot made his first visit late in the summer of 1860. It was undoubtedly the Holmes parlor in which Bishop Talbot held
services during his April 1861 trip, and Dr. Holmes continued to serve as the parish lay reader whenever the small congregation was without a rector. The first such period without a missionary came in early 1863, when Rev. Hagar was sent to work in Colorado Territory for several months. Upon his return, in November 1863, he began his tenure as principal pro tem of Brownell Hall near Omaha, leaving the fledgling congregation rudderless. Finally in May 1865, Rev. George C. Davis was appointed by the Board of Missions to serve congregations in Nemaha and Brownville.

To secure a permanent presence in the southeast Nebraska Territory community, the bishop knew the congregation needed to be a parish with their own building. Parishioners worked hard to raise the funds for construction of a church building. Their donations totaled $500, and came in increments ranging from $5 to $100. For the remainder needed to begin construction, Bishop Talbot turned to the congregations of St. John’s in Waterbury, Connecticut – the Holmes’ original home parish, as well as that of St. John’s in Elizabeth, New Jersey, for financial help. On May 26, 1865, Bishop Talbot formally organized the parish in Nemaha. It was called St. John’s to honor its benefactors, and Dr. Frederick G. Holmes was elected one of the first wardens. The cornerstone for St. John’s was laid on July 18, 1865; its walnut benches were hewn at the local sawmill. The little building, constructed of “material [that] was not of the best or most durable quality,” was consecrated on May 6, 1866, by Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson. The list of its congregation members was extremely interesting, and revealed much about Episcopal Church membership on the Great Plains. The religious persuasions of each parishioner was referred to as his/her “education,” and was recorded for each member when any one joined the congregation. Individuals’ religious backgrounds ranged from “Romanist” and “Mixed” to “Universalist” and “Agnostic.”

Sadly, time did not smile favorably on the river towns of southeast Nebraska. By the early 1870s, river boat traffic had died out, and the railroads had bypassed the region to the north. The small
parish had several rectors through the 1870s, until Rev. Matthew Henry assumed leadership in the fall of 1879. He had come to the Diocese of Nebraska from Quebec in 1873, and had served as a missionary in multiple small churches in the southeast quadrant of the state. One of the first events at St. John’s under his rectorship was the Harvest Home festival, a celebration encouraged by Bishop Clarkson to unite parish congregations while raising funds to offset their costs of operation. The celebration at St. John’s was a rousing success. At the close of his letter to the diocesan newspaper after the event, Rev. Henry noted that the congregation was building a “neat and commodious parsonage” to make his life more comfortable. In December, Rev. Henry wrote to the paper again, “as a reminder that we as a Mission are still alive.” However, a shortfall of $300 in the rectory building fund, coupled with winter weather had postponed construction of the rectory. Over two years later, it was still unplastered, “although in other respects complete and comfortable.” By December 1882, when they committed to placing a window in the cathedral clerestory, the small congregation had only about thirty members.

In 1885, diocesan administration noted that:

church prosperity languished under very irregular ministrations. Notwithstanding all these discouragements, a small band of devoted church people held the ground in face of the advantage that was taken of our weakness by other denominations. The Sunday school was kept up, and at many times this was the center around which they rallied.

The diocesan solution was to place a dedicated missionary in the southeast part of the state. The regularly held church services and special celebrations of church festival days, “infused new life into the little congregation, and soon all the activity of a little bee-hive was exhibited.”

A major drawback remained, however. The church had been built outside Nemaha’s city limits, which hampered attendance. Additionally, it was in serious disrepair. The solution was to purchase new lots in town, and to move the serviceable parts of the original building to the new site, and then rebuild the structure. The church was placed on a new, good stone foundation, it was re-sided, a new
vestibule with double paneled doors was added, and a new floor was laid down. At the apex of the roof, a well-built belfry was constructed, and in it was hung a beautiful, clear-toned bell. The interior was re-plastered, and stone steps were added to the front of the building. The first services in the refurbished building were held January 23, 1887. Nebraska’s new bishop, Rt. Rev. George Worthington, consecrated St. John’s for the second time on April 18, 1887. But the dye was cast; the Episcopal presence was waning in Nemaha. The last entry for services is March 13, 1892. Adding insult, late in the summer of 1892, a tornado badly damaged the structure. By then, the congregation had only twenty-four communicants, and no rector. Parishioners worked hard to repair the building, but their funds were sorely limited. Nonetheless feeling compelled to restore their congregation, parishioners offered $100 annually to support the services of a clergyman.

The future of St. John’s was bleak. The area missionary did not often visit, and in 1898, the status of the church was reduced to that of an unorganized mission. In 1903, the bishop noted that St. John’s was one of only two churches he did not visit in the preceding year; it had virtually no congregation. St. John’s was closed sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century. And most irreverently, the building was dismantled and the lumber was used to construct a residence in Nemaha.

Although St. John’s Episcopal Church in Nemaha City did not remain a viable parish, it is important to note that Christianity did. And although the economy of Nemaha City did not flourish, the Episcopal Church did. Knit together by shared Christian values and prairie dreams, a group of religiously disparate pioneers established a parish community that further united the civic community that surrounded it. And when the congregation disbursed as civic residents, each took his faith with him or her to a new domicile, spreading the Gospel just as Paul intended.

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