Falls City, Nebraska
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Organized mid-1868

Falls City “is beautifully situated on ground which the Maker must have designed for the seat of the grand little city.” So did author Lewis C. Edwards describe the setting of Falls City in his 1917 *History of Richardson County*. Credit for choosing the site goes to John A. Burbank who had come West in 1857, hoping to establish a town on the Great Plains. Traveling along a recently established federal mail route in southeast Nebraska Territory, Burbank was enticed to view the townsite’s potential by another early pioneer who had established a mill and a town called Nemaha Falls at the nearby falls on the Nemaha River. The falls resulted from the Nemaha River’s stone bed, which at that point dropped four feet producing both a lovely setting and the potential to produce power for a mill. To capitalize on the site’s potential in the summer of 1857, Burbank and four others created the Falls City Town Association and platted Falls City on the higher ground to the north of the falls. The town was incorporated in April 1858. Lawyer Isham Reavis, who settled in Falls City in that very early period, described the town on his arrival in early 1858:

> Everything appeared to be old, except the people. Most of the houses were built of second-hand lumber, brought over from the wreck of old Archer and Yankton [two nearby, early communities], and made into six or eight shacks, or excuses for houses, and this was Falls City as I saw it in [1858].

In July 1858, heavy rain fell over a period of several days, causing the Nemaha River to leave its banks near the falls, inundating homes in the village of Nemaha Falls. Settlers’ livestock drowned and bridges were washed away. The flood forced all pioneer villagers in the area to higher ground, many of whom moved into Falls City, and became permanent residents.

Along with settlers and their related commercial activities came missionaries and their religious affiliations. The Methodists came first, arriving even before the town was established. Among the earliest residents was Wingate King, who identified with the Methodists and was referred to as “something of a preacher.” King built a substantial house, which he occupied only briefly. Because
there was no church building in the town in those early days, the women of Falls City used the empty Wingate house as a Sunday School. Thereafter, the structure served as place for public worship, until the first church building – complete with a steeple and a bell – was constructed by the Methodists in 1867. The Episcopal Church also made contact early in the town’s existence. In September 1860, Missionary Bishop Joseph Cruickshank Talbot, headquartered in nearby Nebraska City, held the first Episcopal services in Falls City in that house of public worship. The bishop had brought his family safely to Nebraska City from Indiana in the summer of 1860, and as soon as they were settled, he set off on his second trip into the newly established missionary district. Traveling with “the excellent and venerable missionary” Rev. Eli Adams, who was rector of St. Mary’s, the pair headed south from their Nebraska City residence toward the Kansas Territory line, making a stop in Falls City. In attendance at that first service was Edward W. Thomas, a young lawyer living in Brownville. He seemed to be the only member of the assembled village congregation familiar at all with the rites of the Episcopal Church. Thomas became a parishioner of the parish; he was described in 1893 as the “oldest communicant” in Falls City.

Several years passed with virtually no contact between Bishop Talbot’s Missionary District of the Northwest and the village of Falls City. Through the Civil War years, few missionaries worked in Bishop Talbot’s jurisdiction. In fact, in 1863, he reported only six preaching stations and five missionaries in his huge district which stretched from the Missouri River on the east edge of Nebraska Territory, all the way to the eastern border of the State of California – 750,000 square miles! The designated preaching stations were all along the west bank of the Missouri River. Unfortunately for Falls City, the community was then regarded as being too far inland, and its population too small, to receive much attention from the Episcopal Church. In 1864, two clergymen were added to the bishop’s roster of missionaries, and on July 19, 1864, Bishop Talbot was heartened when three men appeared
before the district’s standing committee to be received as candidates for Holy Orders; two were from Colorado, one from Nevada. One of the new candidates was Rev. George C. Betts, already an ordained Methodist minister, then shepherding the congregation of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Denver, Colorado. Rev. Betts was eventually ordained as an Episcopal priest, as was his father Thomas Betts, then a recent immigrant to America. The two men left a tremendous legacy for the Episcopal Church in Nebraska.

After meeting with the district’s standing committee, Rev. George Betts undertook his study for Holy Orders under Rev. Samuel Hermann, a recently arrived clergyman from Connecticut who was called to Nebraska Territory to serve as the headmaster at Brownell Hall. George Betts had been born and reared in Dublin. In 1861, he left his family in Ireland and immigrated to the United States. Back in Ireland, his father, schoolmaster Thomas Francis Betts, continued to suffer from undiagnosed health issues, and in September 1865, he and his wife of more than thirty years, Elizabeth, along with his two teen-aged daughters, came to America, hoping to improve the elder Betts’ health. His son, candidate for Orders George C. Betts, was then living in Plattsmouth, having assumed responsibility for the town’s buildingless Episcopal mission – then called St. John’s – in spring 1865. On May 9, he had organized the mission’s congregation as St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. When the elder Betts family arrived in the United States, they moved into the home of son Rev. George Betts and his family. About twenty-five miles south of Plattsmouth lay Nebraska City.

Bishop Talbot had chosen Nebraska City as his residence upon his 1860 arrival in the territory. He purchased a forty acre farm there, and when Bishop Talbot left Nebraska Territory in late 1865, his successor, Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson, purchased the land from Bishop Talbot. Bishop Clarkson lived in the residence, but he saw other uses for the land. The bishop believed strongly that the territory needed a school for boys (Brownell Hall for girls had been established near Omaha in 1863), as well as a
divinity school where new clergy who would assist him in his missionary district could be educated. Thus, he planned to establish a school on part of the farm. In the summer of 1866, ground was broken for Talbot Hall, the first building on the divinity school’s campus. The health of Thomas Francis Betts, by then 57 years old, improved in Nebraska’s climate, and the elder Betts became one of the first students at the college, educated under the tutelage of Rev. John G. Gasmann, sister-in-law of Bishop Clarkson’s wife, Meliora McPherson Clarkson. On June 16, 1867, Rev. Thomas Betts became the first candidate for Holy Orders ordained by Bishop Clarkson. The elder Betts was ordained a priest on July 12, 1868, at Trinity Cathedral in Omaha.

Bishop Clarkson first sent Rev. Thomas Betts to Rulo, a Missouri River town with (what in 1867 seemed to be) better prospects for growth. After nearly a decade of little connection to Falls City, the elder Betts was also assigned to minister to the needs of that town’s population. In 1868, the Board of Missions offered $1,500 for construction of a building to the potential congregation at Falls City, if the population there could raise an equal amount. In August 1867, Bishop Clarkson, working with Long Island Bishop Abraham Newkirk Littlejohn, began collecting subscriptions for the construction of the church in Falls City. The funds were raised locally, but with significant help from the congregation of St. Thomas in New York City, and in 1868, Rev. Thomas Betts presided at the laying of the cornerstone for the new church. It was named St. Thomas to honor its benefactors. The foundation of the frame building was placed high above the street so that the basement could be used for parish activities and for a school where classes were taught by Father Betts, who then resided at at Rulo. So services could be held without ordained clergy, Bishop Clarkson appointed John Lyon as lay reader. Until 1870, when the latter was ordained, Rev. Betts alternated his Sunday services between Rulo and Falls City. After his 1870 ordination, Rev. John Lyon took charge of the mission for a short time until he transferred to St. Stephen’s in Grand Island.
St. Thomas was not completed until 1873. Then under the leadership of Rev. Thomas Betts, referred to as the “Diocesan Patriarch.” The church was debt free, and on June 30, 1873, Rev. Betts presided at the first church services in the new building. On August 4, 1873, St. Thomas was organized as a parish under the rectorship of Rev. Francis Burdett Nash. After the opening services in St. Thomas, Rev. Thomas Betts had accepted a series of calls to churches in Kansas, in order to be closer to his son, Rev. George Betts, who was then serving congregations in Kansas City and St. Louis. Three years later, Rev. Thomas Betts accepted a call to return to Falls City as rector of St. Thomas, and missionary at St. Peter’s Rulo. Needing transportation between the two communities, at the Annual Council in late May 1877, Rev. Betts:

took the floor and meeting by storm. In a few words he detailed the nature of his work and field of operation, and said he needed a horse to enable him to carry it on effectively, –results – Mr. Betts rode home to Rulo on the back of a horse, adorned with a new saddle and with a riding whip in his hand.

The horse was probably Peter, reportedly a carriage house belonging to the bishop’s wife, Meliora Clarkson. Residents of Falls City affectionately remembered the elderly priest’s bi-weekly arrival in town on Peter the horse. Rev. Betts ministered to both congregations over the next two years, while he continued to reside in Rulo. Highly regarded by both congregations, Rev. Thomas Betts died quietly in his sleep on July 2, 1878. Deeply saddened, Bishop Clarkson described the elder Betts:

We found him so full of scriptural knowledge, so interested in the work of the Church, and so willing to devote himself to the Master’s cause, that we had no hesitation, notwithstanding his somewhat advanced years, in receiving him as a candidate for the Ministry. . . . Rarely have we seen a community, more deeply impressed by the example of a godly life, than the one a Rulo, where he lived and died.

Over the next decades, the Falls City congregation was ministered by several missionaries who served a mission field established in southeast Nebraska, although the Falls City church retained its parish status. When the cathedral was built and the clerestory window for St. Thomas was installed in
1883, the congregation numbered some sixty members; the outlook of the parish appeared “encouraging.” The original building remained in use until 1899, when construction began on the present structure. The old frame building was moved to a lot south of the present building, where it remains in 2018. The present building was consecrated on June 18, 1901. Described as;

an imposing structure of pressed brick, . . . The style of architecture is beautiful and the simplicity of the whole is just balanced by the beauty and size of the large stained-glass windows, each a work of art. The interior of the church is especially fine. The wood work is finished in hard pine and the walls elaborately frescoed.

A new altar and font were added in 1902, and a lovely rood screen was installed in 1903. Alterations in the structure were made in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. St. Thomas remains an active parish in Falls City, just as it was at the turn of the twentieth century. A lovely structure with a small congregation, its importance to the early church in Nebraska, in the then thriving and vibrant southeast quadrant of the territory, is permanently memorialized in the Cathedral clerestory.

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