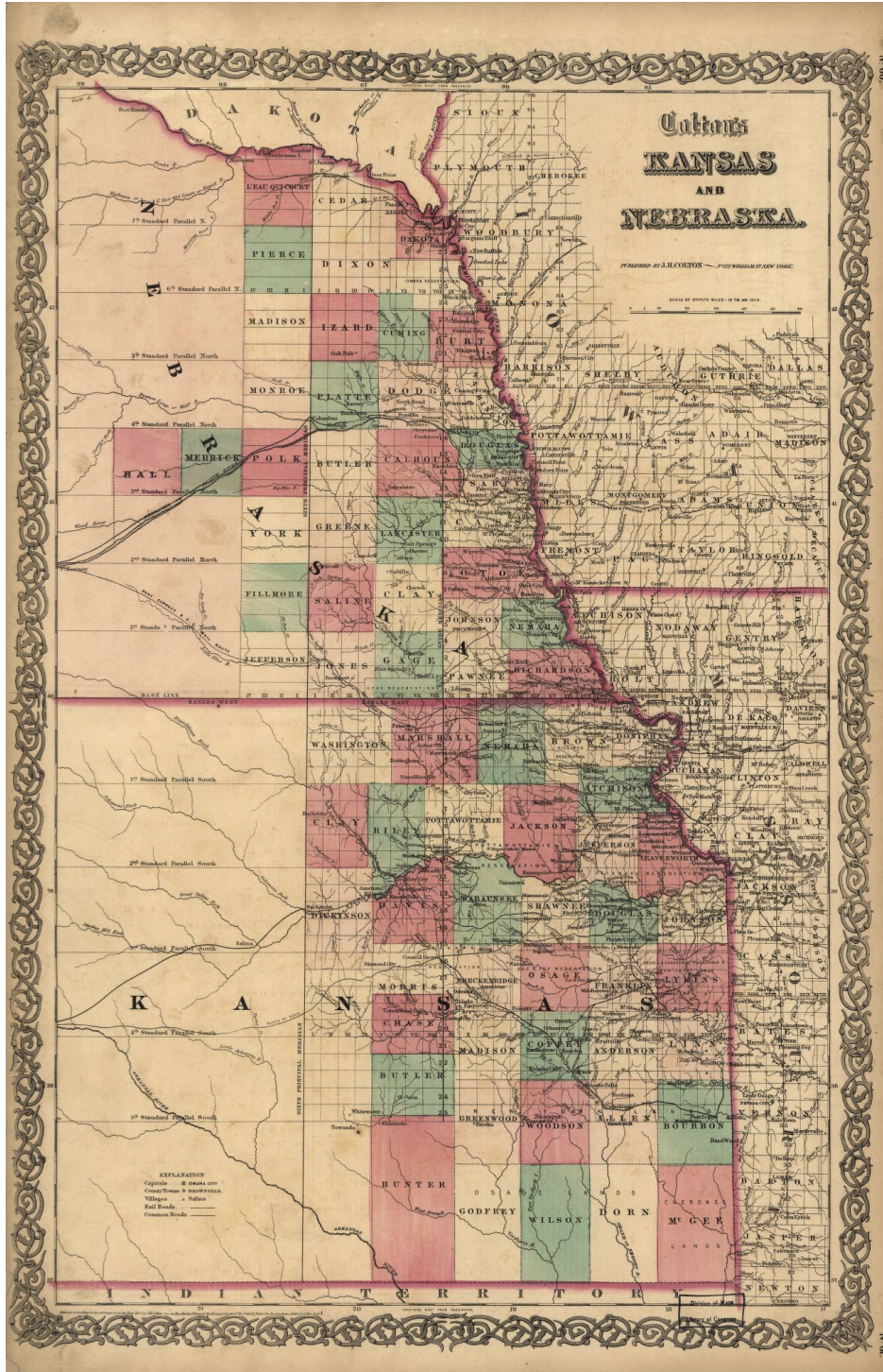


Jim McKee: When southern Nebraska tried to secede and join Kansas

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This map of Nebraska in 1856 shows the area south of the Platte River whose residents decided to attempt to withdraw from Nebraska and merge with Kansas as that state approached statehood. (Courtesy photo)



In 1855, one year after the Nebraska Territory was formed, Nebraska City was the largest settlement in the territory, the "leader of the South Platte Section and chief rival of Omaha" even though the capital had been placed in Omaha by Gov. Cuming.

Although the population living south of the Platte River was double that of the north, the governor has manipulated legislative boundaries so that Omaha and the north commanded a majority in the Legislature.

On Jan. 17, 1856, J. Sterling Morton introduced a bill in the Nebraska Legislature's lower house that would ask the U.S. Congress to reconsider the territorial description using the Platte River as the northern boundary of Kansas, effectively letting the South Platte area secede from Nebraska and be annexed to Kansas.

Morton argued that the move would be in the best interests of Nebraska, Kansas and the United States. He pointed out that having the Platte River in the middle of Nebraska was impractical because it would never be possible to easily bridge and thus was a natural boundary. Additionally, by annexing the South Platte to Kansas, the politics of that territory would be altered so that it would "guarantee (the) freedom of Kansas" in the question of slavery.

The house did not agree with Morton, and the bill was tabled on a vote of 20 to 5.

But the division of Nebraska north and south of the Platte had become so fierce by 1857 that the southern faction became fixated on removal of the capital from Omaha to a point south of the river. The 1858 rump legislature at Florence accelerated the division when the press pointed out that up to that point every federal dollar given to Nebraska had benefited only the north.

The Nebraska City News referred to the Platte River boundary as "the hateful tie that binds us to the north country."

A subsequent bill which would have taken parts of Otoe and Cass counties to form the new Strickland County brought the south versus the north to the boiling point.

In 1859, at what was called the Brownville Convention, Morton, as leader of the secessionist movement, told the gathering that annexation is the South Platte's "only hope-our salvation."

An open meeting on the question at Nebraska City brought a resolution to approach the U.S. Congress and ask them to use their discretion to change the northern Kansas boundary using the "impassable" boundary of the Platte. Kansas would then become "one of the most important states in the great west."

Meantime, a bill to annex southern Nebraska was floated in the Kansas House of Representatives but did not make it out of committee.

On July 12, 1859, the 12 "honorary delegates," including Jacob Dawson of Lancaster County, were given the floor to argue their case in Kansas. Although 13 pages of testimony were given, two powerful reasons were used against them. First, it was felt the annexed area was apt to be Democratic, and, second, the increase in area would push the center of the new state north, working against Topeka and Lawrence, which were both hoping to become the Kansas state capital. The ultimate vote was thus quite powerfully against annexation.

With statehood in 1867, the South Platte faction was finally vindicated as the capital was placed at Lancaster and renamed Lincoln. Even Morton noted that it was ultimately best for Nebraska not to have been divided and partially wed to Kansas.

Secession was not totally forgotten, however, and in the 1890s the Nebraska panhandle counties threatened to annex themselves to Wyoming, where irrigation laws were more favorable

Historian Jim McKee, who still writes with a fountain pen, invites comments or questions. Write to him in care of the Journal Star or at jim@leebooksellers.com.