

Chimney Hints at Mission's Past

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A chimney is all that remains of the Moses Merrill Mission, the oldest above - ground structure built by white settlers in Nebraska. Merrill built the Baptist mission in 1835. With his wife, Eliza, and another missionary, Cynthia Brown, he maintained the post to convert and educate Otoe Indians until his death from tuberculosis in 1840.

Today, wooden braces added as chimney supports are weathered to gray. A padlocked chain - link fence encloses the grounds where the structure stood. Two immense cottonwood trees, shown in photographs dating to the early 1920s, stand near the chimney.

The mission site is south of Bellevue on LaPlatte Road.

An Otoe Mission historical marker on the west side of U.S. marks the turnoff to LaPlatte Road. The mission is 3 1/2 miles west of the highway and 1 1/2 miles north of the Platte River.

Yellowed newspaper clippings, old photographs and out - of - print books help reconstruct the story of the Merrills, their missionary zeal and the mission itself. The site was entered on the National Register of Historic Places in March 1972, according to records at the Sarpy County Historical Society, which took over the deed to the site in 1981.

It was the first permanent mission to be built in what now is Nebraska. It consisted of a school, a council house and living quarters. Although each structure had a chimney made from brick or stone from a nearby quarry, only one chimney stands.

According to a legal description submitted for the site's nomination to the national register, the hand - hewn log structures included a 16 - by - 20 - foot schoolhouse; a 16 - foot square council house; and the Merrills' home in two adjoining sections - a 16 - by - 24 - foot kitchen and bedroom area and a 16 - by - 18 - foot sitting room and study.

Sources for information about the Merrills and their mission include the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Nebraska Baptist State Convention and the journals of the Merrills themselves.

J. Sterling Morton profiled Merrill in his "Illustrated History of Nebraska," published in 1905.

Merrill was born in Sedgwick, Maine, on Dec. 15, 1803, son of Daniel and Susannah (Gale) Merrill. His father fought in the Revolutionary War and later was a Baptist minister.

Moses Merrill studied in district schools and went on to an academy, after which he taught school.

According to Morton's account, "In April 1829, he was licensed to preach and after teaching a short time in Albany, N.Y., he offered himself to the N.Y. Baptist state convention as a missionary among the Indians of that state, but no appointment was made. In the fall of 1829, he went to Ann Arbor, Mich., and in company with his brother started a small school which he continued to teach for some time, devoting himself also to theological study."

Merrill married Eliza Wilcox in 1830, and they were assigned to mission work in Sault Sainte Marie, Mich., in September 1832. They were transferred to the Shawnee mission in Missouri and soon afterward came to Bellevue. They arrived Nov. 19, 1833, and opened a mission school.

"In 1835, the Otoe Indians were removed to a new location on the Platte River, six miles from its mouth, and a new Otoe village was established," Morton wrote. "To this village, Mr. Merrill and the family removed on Sept. 18, 1835, and with his faithful wife he labored among the Indians, teaching, ministering and preaching to them until his life was cut short by consumption Feb. 6, 1840.

"He was buried on the east bank of the Missouri River, the Rev. John Dunbar of the Presbyterian Board of Missions officiating at his funeral."

Cynthia Brown married Reuben Mercer, an employee of the Merrills', in August 1835. Although the Mercers stayed for a time, Baptist Convention records say the couple eventually moved to another missionary post "100 miles up the Missouri River."

After Merrill's death at age 36, church records show that Mrs. Merrill and her son moved east. During the Merrills' nearly seven years at the mission, they kept journals which, with their son's later recollections, create a story of hardships - scant supplies, illness and language barriers - and successes.

The Nebraska State Historical Society provided the following excerpts from Merrill's diary:

July 2, 1833 - Today called on Mr. Joseph Charles, of Saint Louis; was very kindly received. . . . Mr. Charles is acquainted with Indian manners and prejudices. He gave me the following useful hints: First - Beware of making promises that may in some respects fail of being fulfilled. Second - Beware of handing out to them promises from government which may fail of being realized. Third - Do not be hasty in becoming

familiar with the Indians or of inviting them as guests. Fourth - Have a full and fair understanding with the chiefs. See that the interpreters do not impose on you by giving false interpretations. Fifth - Beware of levity especially in presence of the Indians. Sixth - Be friendly - do, rather than propose to do.

Sept. 17, 1833 - Crossed the Platte river opposite the Otoe village. . . . Came near being drowned, but God preserved me. Rode all day with wet clothes. In the afternoon my horse was bitten by a rattlesnake. Was kindly received by Major Pitcher (sic) at the trading post. He gave me many kind assurances.

Jan. 30, 1834 - Mischingayinge and Muskagaa called upon us and wished to pass the night. They are men of some distinction in the Otoe tribe, and aided us in getting Otoe words. They evidently worship the sun. Are pleasant, but beg for many things.

May 9, 1834 - Rode to the trading post eighteen miles from Bellevue, hoping to find company to the Otoe village. On my arrival found ten Otoe Indians had just come in to trade, and would return the next day. In the evening called on the Otoe and French interpreter, and obtained also a French and English interpreter, and made further translation of Scripture lessons. I have now the creation, a short account of Christ's two prayers, and a blessing translated, besides some moral lessons.

Sept. 18, 1835 - Removed my family to the mission station on the La Platte. . . . Many seem opposed to this location.

Sept. 20, 1835 - Lord's day. Meeting at my own residence, which is a log building sixteen feet square, just erected by my men.

Oct. 13, 1835 - Doctor Whitman, a Presbyterian missionary, returned from the mountains. He had a prosperous journey.

Nov. 14, 1835 - Have labored hard to prepare my house as soon as possible for my family.

Dec. 4, 1835 - Removed my family into our dwelling house.