



# *Downtown Neighborhood History*

The Downtown area is of course the original Heart of Lincoln, the area in which the first settlers to the region began building log homes and wooden sidewalks. The Downtown neighborhood stands on what was once the tiny village of Lancaster, which boasted a total of five small, widely scattered cabins (one cabin stood at what is now 7th and O, while another stood at 15th and O). These few settlers had likely come to harvest salt from the Salt basins of Salt and Oak Creeks.

Salt was especially scarce during the Civil War years (1861-65), **(1)** and many came to the region simply for the fact that salt was plentiful. One author describes the process of scraping salt: "Going for salt in those days was like going fishing. It was all in luck. If the weather was perfectly dry, they could get plenty of it, for it could be scraped up by the wagon load; but three minutes of rain would end the game....In dry times we would accumulate a mountain of scraped salt, and as soon as the first rain came our scrapings would be worth from fifty cents to one dollar per hundred." **(2)**

Later in the decade, Nebraska was admitted to the Union, and the village of Lancaster was chosen for the site of the state capital. Soon after, lots for the newly formed town of Lincoln went up for sale. In 1868, the year after Nebraska became a state, Lincoln was a frontier town of 500 people; **(3)** the settled portion of the town was a tiny 25 blocks bounded by Eighth, Twelfth, R and N streets. The predecessor to today's Haymarket district was also located here. In 1867 a Market Square was designated between O and P, Ninth and Tenth streets. By 1868, the square had become "an open-air market for produce and livestock, as well as a camping ground for immigrants and a general gathering place. Machines, wagons and animals thronged Market Square, along with land sharks, tin-horn gamblers, and the other denizens of a pioneer town." **(4)**

The Downtown area was also plagued by floods in its early years, as spring melts and summer thunderstorms often filled Salt Creek past its banks and into the city. Some flooding was an almost annual occurrence; more serious floods were recorded for the years 1874, 1881, 1885, 1889, 1902, 1905, 1908, and 1913, to name a few. **(5)** The 1889 flood covered the Russian Bottoms (South Salt Creek and North Bottoms



COURTESY PHOTO  
The 1908 flood brought Salt Creek's water up to the intersection of 12th and O streets in this photo looking toward the northwest.

areas) with as much as three feet of water and came as far into Downtown as 7th and O. The 1908 flood brought waters up to 12th and O (picture courtesy of LJS and Jim McKee).

After the 1950 flood, which caused \$1.6 million worth of damage and killed nine people, **(6)** a committee of farmers and business owners, in coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, put together a flood control plan calling for 17 dams and reservoirs, as well as a system of channel improvement and levees. **(7)** The plan was put into effect in 1960, and after a 6" rain in June 1963, no major flooding occurred.

Because of the age of the neighborhood, Downtown is full of historic sites. Among the highlights are:



Lavender Cabin, first house on the site of Lincoln

1. The very first house built on the site of Lincoln was the log cabin of Luke Lavender, located

near what is now Fifteenth and O streets. Lavender's cabin was one of the five dwellings that made up the tiny village of Lancaster, but of course it's long since been demolished.

2. The Kennard House at 1627 H (on National Register of Historic Places). In 1869, Thomas Kennard, the Secretary of State and John Gillespie, the State Auditor, both had homes built to the southeast of the capitol building. Supposedly, this was to demonstrate confidence in the infant city. Apparently it worked--in 1870, there were 2,400 people living in Lincoln, and by 1875 the number was 7,300 and growing. **(8)** Eventually, the Gillespie house was torn down, but the Kennard House still stands.

3. The Capitol(s). In 1867, four square blocks between 14th and 16th, H and K streets were designated as Capitol Square. The first state Capitol building went up in 1868 on this site. Unfortunately, the limestone used to construct the building tended to dissolve in rainwater, so a second Capitol was built in 1880. By 1921, overcrowding and more structural problems prompted the construction of the current building, which is often referred to as one of the seven wonders of 20th century architecture. **(9)**



Built over the span of a decade (1922-32), it is the tallest capitol building in the nation, standing at 400 feet and topped by the bronze statue of the Sower (37 feet including the pedestal). The Capitol is more than just structurally significant. It is, in the words of one author, "a building of the highest quality, a collaboration of architect, builders, sculptor, mosaicist, philosopher, landscape architect, and other artists to produce a building of global significance." **(10)** The exterior and interior of the building is graced with inscriptions, sculptures, decorative tiles, mosaics, and murals. The multi-colored tiled ceiling vaults are considered among the finest in the world. **(11)**

As in 1868, the Downtown district is still a center of activity for the city, with numerous theaters, locally owned businesses, banks, restaurants and museums.

Sources:

1. Sawyer, A.J. ed. Lincoln, the Capital City and Lancaster County Nebraska. 2 vols. (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916), 118.
2. Ibid., 117-18.
3. Ibid., 112.
4. Haymarket Landmark District Walking Tour. (Lincoln: Lincoln Haymarket Development Corporation, 1987), 4.
5. McKee, Jim. "Flooding, once common in city, now mostly a memory." Lincoln Journal-Star. 3 September 2000: 2K; Hillegass, Linda. City Shapers: Five Events that Defined Lincoln. np.
6. McKee, Jim, "Flooding, once common..."
7. Hillegass, Linda, City Shapers, np.
8. Sawyer, A. J., Lincoln, the Capital City, 111.
9. The Near South Walking Tours Volume 2: Mount Emerald and Environs. (Lincoln: Augstums Printing Service, 1989), 3.
10. Ibid.
11. Junior League of Lincoln. An Architectural Album. (Lincoln: Jacob North Printing Co., 1979), 66.

