
Giddings and the Founding of Table Rock

wjgriffing@comcast.net

Home Up Next

wjgriffing@comcast.net

Donald F. Danker published the following article in the Nebraska State Historical Quarterly, Vol. XXXIV, No 1, (pp 33-53) in March, 1953.

C. W. Giddings and the Founding of Table Rock

By Donald F. Danker

The Charles W. Giddings papers in the Archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society contain documents which outline the story of the foundation and growth of the Nebraska town of Table Rock. In the papers are the original Constitution of the Nebraska Settlement Company, dated October 2, 1856 and the Articles of Association of the Company, dated February 3, 1857. Along with these two documents which mark the conception of Table Rock, are the deeds to lands and lots, papers dealing with incorporation and with the coming of the railroad; documents which record its birth and growth. Also in the Giddings papers are the notices of sheriffs' sales for delinquent taxes and for judgments which give indictments of the setbacks and blighted hopes of many of the pioneers of Table Rock.

The story of the beginnings of Table Rock is to a large extent the story of the efforts of Charles W. Giddings. He was a prime mover in the establishment and development of the community. Giddings, the son of a New England sea captain, was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in May 1810, but spent his boyhood and youth in Wayne County, Pennsylvania. He was ordained as a Methodist Episcopal minister at the age of twenty-two

and preached in Pennsylvania and New York for the next twenty seven years. Failing health led him to take a trip west to visit a brother-in-law in Manhattan [this should be Topeka], Kansas. He was impressed with the climate and opportunities of the vast new area of the Kansas-Nebraska territory that had been so recently opened to settlers. Returning to his home in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, he took a leading part in the organization of the Nebraska Settlement Company. It is probable that Nebraska was chosen instead of Kansas as a site for settlement because of its less explosive political and social situation.

The Nebraska Settlement Company is said to have been composed of "Pennsylvania Capitalists." Giddings described them as "enterprising capitalists who having made considerable fortunes in the coal business of that state (Pennsylvania) had conceived of the idea of transferring their interest and capital to the West in hopes of a larger field of operations and a more ample remuneration of their enterprise." The Nebraska Advertiser attributed a more philanthropic if less realistic motive to the company. "This company was organized...by enterprising men who were desirous to afford an opportunity to families and young men of limited means of going west and securing a home at much less than they could in the old states. The enterprise was truly a commendable one..."

A constitution for the Nebraska Settlement Company was drawn up. It set forth the purposes of the organization and the methods and rules by which those purposes were to be obtained... Previous to the signing of this document on October 23, 1856, the Company had elected Giddings as its general superintendent and R. V. Muir as treasurer. In the spring of 1856 these two men came to Nebraska as advance agents of the Company for the purpose of selecting a site for the development in which the Company wished

to engage. They chose a location on the Nemaha River in Pawnee County, Nebraska Territory, about 23 miles from the Missouri River.

The location chosen was an attractive area. [So attractive, in fact, that] in 1855, Robert Furnas, James Hinton and John Fleming [had already] organized the Table Rock Townsite Company and partially laid out a town. Their chief identity was to plan and begin the construction of a mill on the Nemaha.

Giddings and Muir, as agents of the Nebraska Settlement Company purchased the interests of the Table Rock Townsite Company in 1857. Giddings thought these interests to be “more imaginary than real.”

The Nebraska Settlement Company had hopes that coal mines would be developed in the area. It also believed that a railroad would be built from St. Joseph up along the Nemaha Valley and on to the Pacific Coast. Table Rock was to be one of its principal stations...

In February 1857, Articles of Association had been entered into by members of the Nebraska Settlement Company. These Articles were designed to unite members of the company into a partnership, aimed at carrying out the objectives set forth in the constitution of the Nebraska Settlement Company until such time as that company could become a corporation under the laws of the Territory of Nebraska.

The company attempted to achieve incorporation by special act of the legislature. Bills for incorporation of the Nebraska Settlement Company were introduced into the House and Council in January, 1857. They were limited by amendment and then failed to pass. The company finally achieved incorporation by another method. A general incorporation law was included in the Act of the Legislature of the Nebraska Territory

entitled, "an act for revising, consolidating, and preparing a general code for the Territory of Nebraska, approved January 25, 1856." This act outlined the form and powers of corporations and stated, "The powers enumerated...shall vest in every corporation in this territory whether the same be formed without, or by Legislative enactment." Among the requirements of incorporation was the compulsory publication for four weeks of notice of incorporation in a newspaper near the source of business. This notice in the form of the constitution of the Nebraska Settlement Company and no entitled "Articles of Incorporation of the Nebraska Settlement Company" was published the required number of times in the Nebraska Advertiser. The names of Robert W. Furnas, editor of the Nebraska Advertiser and future governor of Nebraska, and S. B. Cowles had been added as members of the corporation.

...Giddings spent the summer of 1857 in Nebraska acting for the company. He also had charge of the interests of certain members of the company remaining in Pennsylvania who had given him power of attorney to handle their shares of company property. He estimated that some 200 families came out from Pennsylvania and New York in the years 1856-1857 in order to take advantage of the "opportunities" afforded by the Nebraska Settlement Company. The Giddings family remained in Oneida, New York, [should be Kingston, Pennsylvania] until 1858 when Giddings went back and brought them to Nebraska. They traveled by rail to St. Louis and from there by river steamer to Aspinwall, and by spring wagon the remaining miles to Table Rock. It is probable that Giddings had a house waiting for his family. A bill of lading in the Giddings papers indicates that on June 19, 1857 there was received on "the good steamboat Alonzo Childs" lying in St. Louis and bound for Brownsville, N. T. [a supply of construction materials] to be delivered to C.

W. Giddings.

The Nebraska Settlement Company combined a spirit for reform with the hope of profit. Article 13 of the constitution prohibited any member of the company from selling alcohol within the bounds of company settlement. This restriction was written into the deeds for lots purchased in Table Rock. "The sale of intoxicating drinks as beverages on any of the lots above described works for a forfeiture of the title conveyed by this deed." Giddings is said to have included this provision in the deeds to land sold by him after the company no longer existed. R. V. Muir, treasurer of the Nebraska Settlement Company and the surveyor of Table Rock, was a very strong advocate of prohibition and devoted the later years of his life to the prohibition movement.

The Giddings papers give no indication that the Nebraska Settlement Company was connected in any way with the abolition movement. It is probable, however, that most of its members were of anti-slavery inclinations and would have resisted vigorously any attempt to make slavery a permanent institution in Nebraska.

The settlement in Table Rock met with early reverses. The panic of 1857 restricted the activities of the "capitalist" backers of the Nebraska Settlement Company. In addition to the financial crisis a new hardship faced the community. During July and August 1858, homes and crops were ruined by high water. The settlers had for the most part built their homes and planted their fields along the river bottom. Not only were their houses and crops ruined but also they were afflicted with "various forms of bilious diseases, of which chills and fevers were the most formidable." Many of the settlers, discouraged by these early misfortunes, returned to the east. It was during this exodus that the Reverend John M. Chivington, Presiding Elder of the Nebraska Conference of the Methodist Episcopal

Church, held a meeting in Table Rock at which he prayed, "Lord send the people here, but make them so poor they can't go away."

The Giddings family and others remained. The census of 1860 lists 201 persons as residents of the Table Rock area. In spite of the fact that large numbers of settlers from Pennsylvania and New York had returned home during 1858 and 1859, these two states still contributed more people to the population than did any other area excepting Nebraska itself...

The Nebraska Settlement Company never recovered from the blows it had received from the panic and the floods. It did not realize the profits for which it had hoped and documents in the Giddings papers indicate that the Company was absorbed by its General Superintendent. In July 1863 Giddings filed suit for "money laid out and expended and for work and labor done." He named as defendants, J. S. Wood, Joseph Steele, Jr., E. F. Ferris, E. A. Coray, James L. Giddings, R. V. Muir, J. S. Cowles, Walter Lyons, and P. Bartlett. Property still held jointly by this group was attached by the Sheriff of Pawnee County. Giddings was awarded the sum of \$1,926.82. The lots were sold at auction and Giddings purchased them for \$2,026.80. He purchased other lots at tax sales and from private owners, and in 1878 he was listed as "proprietor of the townsite."

...It seems probable that Giddings and perhaps other members of the Nebraska Settlement Company were trying to establish a Methodist Seminary at Table Rock. Mrs. Chauncey Norris, daughter of Giddings, stated in a newspaper interview that her father had come to Nebraska with a purpose to establish a college or school. Several members of the company were ordained Methodist ministers and it is unlikely that any other church group would have been endeavoring to start a seminary at Table Rock in 1859.

Giddings did not regard the territorial government as being friendly to the Nebraska Settlement Company. The legislature had refused to grant "certain privileges in the use of the waters of the Nemaha." That he was dissatisfied with the political situation may be inferred from the fact that he served on a three-man delegation from Pawnee County to a convention held at Brownville January 9, 1859. This convention voted in favor of the annexation to Kansas of the region south of the Platte River. Giddings was appointed to a committee charged with drafting an address to the people of the South Platte region and Kansas.

...Giddings turned his energies in many directions. He was one of a group of Pawnee County men to organize a coal company in the spring of 1857. In July 1858 he advertised, "The undersigned brought out from Pennsylvania a number of new light spring wagons, admirably adapted to this country. They are all perfectly new, in good order and are on sale for reasonable terms for cash - C. W. Giddings." In 1878 he was listed as proprietor of the Table Rock Creamery and as "Proprietor of the town site. Dealer in Real Estate and Collection Agent, all business entrusted to his care, whether buying or selling, collecting or securing of claims, will be promptly and carefully attended to. Mr. Giddings is perfectly responsible for any amount placed in his hands." In August, 1878 the Pawnee City Enterprise announced that Giddings would sell cream cheese by the pound or by the ton at his factory in Table Rock."

C. W. Giddings was a man of driving energies. From the beginnings of Table Rock until his death in 1879 he was a community leader. At the same time that he was active in the affairs of Table Rock and in his personal projects he was also actively engaged in church work. The meeting of the Methodist Episcopal

Congregation at Table Rock were held at the Giddings home from 1857 [should be 1858] until 1861 at which time they were moved to the new schoolhouse. The Nebraska Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church appointed Giddings as presiding elder of the Brownville District in 1865, the Nemaha District in 1866, the Nebraska City District in 1867, and the Lincoln District in 1869. This responsibility meant a good deal of traveling. The districts were large, including "that territory between the Kansas line and the Platte River and extending West from the Missouri River as far as settlements could be found."

Giddings died on December 23, 1879. It is said that as he was dying his pastor and friend heard him recite, "Not a cloud doth arise to darken the skies, or hide for a moment the Lord from my eyes."

