First defined on March 2, 1855, Otoe County was formed from "old Pierce County." Named for the former residents of this region, it has been spelled "Ottoe" and "Oto" before its present spelling was agreed upon. The boundaries were redefined in 1856. Its county seat is the river-port, Nebraska City, with other incorporated towns Burr, Douglas, Dunbar, Lorton, Otoe, Palmyra, Syracuse, Talmage, and Unadilla.

Left: An early etching of Nebraska City from the Upland. No city had more hope, more potential, or more politicians than did this town. [Nebraska State Historical Society]

NEBRASKA CITY   OTOE COUNTY

Lewis & Clark were first to note the "ideal site for a future city" on the table land between two small streams, which emptied into the Missouri, and Colonel Kearny recommended it for a fort in 1838. When built eight years later, this early "Fort Kearny" was active only two years, because at that time it was "outside the general stream of travel."

John Boulware's ferry at this location continued even after the fort was vacated in 1848, providing a river crossing during the California gold rush. Hundreds of "49ers" poured across into the territory and blazed "short-cuts" which linked up with more-travelled paths going West.

In 1854, when settlement was opened in the Nebraska Territory, the fort's old buildings provided initial shelter and a nucleus for a town. First called "Table Creek," it was a "postal address" in 1853, then named the county seat in 1854. "Kearney City," "Greggsport" and "Prairie City" were other names associated with this area. When surveyed on July 10, 1854, the plat was given the name "Nebraska City." The post office name was officially changed-over on March 14, 1855. Then, with incorporation completed in January 1856, other would-be settlements merged under this name in 1858.

Nebraska City leaped to prominence as an important steamboat port. Because of its favorable position on the river, it was selected as an outfitting point by the great firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell for its western wagon train transportation operations in 1858.

Above: The dock, elevators, and smokestack at Nebraska City, viewed from the bank of the Missouri River. N.D. [Klima, Nebraska State Historical Society]

In the debate over slavery, however, the citizens of Nebraska City were about evenly divided. The infamous John Brown, militant opponent of slavery, came through Nebraska City five times before he died for the cause. While not many slaves escaped to freedom using Nebraska's "underground railroad," it stands as a symbol of pride for the community.

Frustrated by the power held "north of the Platte" in the territorial government, local politicians nearly succeeded in getting the area south of the Platte attached to Kansas in 1859. Shortly before the Civil War, the legislature passed an anti-slavery bill over the veto of Governor Samuel Black, who was a resident of Nebraska City. When war came, the town gave strong support in defense of the Union.

The promise of a new, shorter road to the West in 1860 on which a "steam wagon" would run (without the need of rails), local businesses invested mightily. While the steam wagon failed, the improved road placed the town as the leading Nebraska freighting point.

Even with all this activity, and a greater population than that north of the river, Nebraska City was unable to "out politic" her rival, Omaha. However, the city claimed a great victory in 1867 when the state's capital was moved to the salt flats near the Nebraska City cut-off road.

Noting the obvious scarcity of trees in Nebraska, many incentives were offered for plantings. In addition to establishing his own orchard and arboretum, J. Sterling Morton became a political proponent of tree-planting, and was the founder of Arbor Day, now a national observance.


Left: J. Sterling Morton, who arrived in Nebraska Territory at age 22, established the Morton Salt Company. Active in politics, he ran for many offices, and served in territorial, national, and state positions. His Arbor Lodge and arboretum led to the establishment of "Arbor Day." The mansion lawn provides a sylvan setting for this statue of this distinguished citizen. [Nebraska State Historical Society]

Below: Arbor Lodge, long a tourist attraction, recalled in snapshots, "By the sundial, 1937." [Ramsay–Graff]

Left: Burlington Depot at Nebraska City, ca. 1910. [Alfred J. J. Holck]
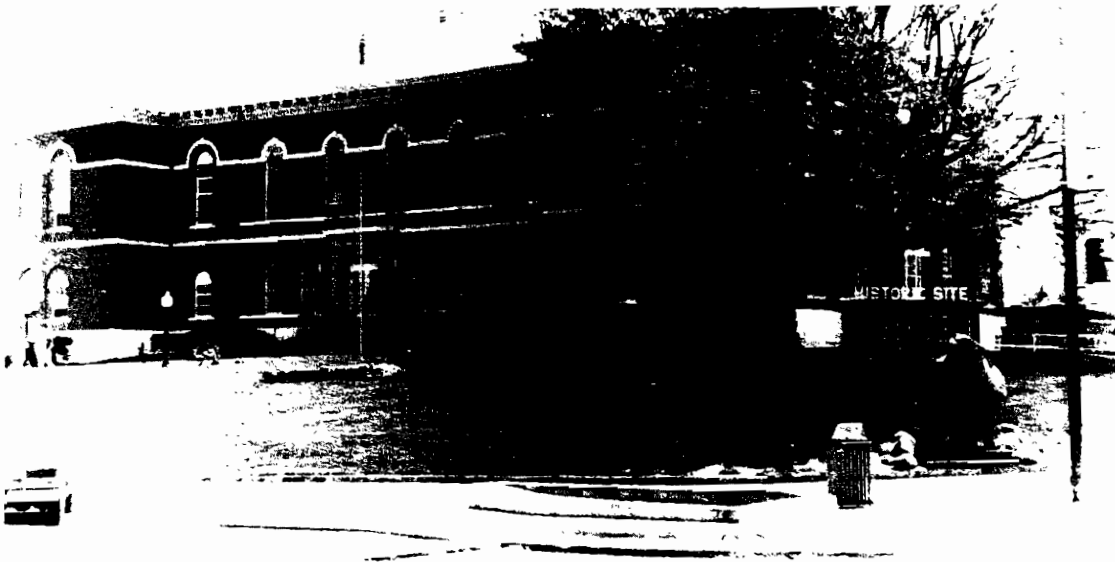
Above: The Otoe County Courthouse, built in 1864, is now the oldest public building in the State of Nebraska. [OCHS]

Below: The Taylor-Shewell-Gilligan House, an Italianate structure built in 1880, was given by the Gilligans to the Nebraska State Historical Society. It is now the office of the Nebraska City Chamber of Commerce and the River Country Industrial Development Company. [Photo by D. Murphy, OCHS]

Above: This structure housed the post office from 1889-1986. Purchased by the Farmers Bank, it has been restored and currently serves as a bank and is a "show piece" in Nebraska City. [OCHS]

Right: The Morton-James Library, on 1st Corso, was built in 1896 as a movement fostered by J. W. Steinhart. Joy Morton and Vantin James financed the project. [OCHS]

Early industrial development brought the city's population to a record 7,550 in 1890 — using the adjusted figures for the highly-suspect cencus of that year. By then, river traffic had diminished and railroads were networking out across the prairie. Freighting, travel, and industry declined, as did the population to about 7,000, where it has remained for many years. Present employment includes plastics and garment manufacturing, gas meter production, electric power generation, meat processing, retail trade and manufacturers outlet stores, and service institutions.

Seasonal activity is stimulated by tourism. Attractions include Arbor Lodge Park and the National Arbor Day Foundation which directs a program of education and promotion of tree-planting and appreciation. They also operate the Morton Memorial Orchard, one of several apple orchards which bring thousands to this location each fall. The city has numerous examples of distinctive early-period architecture. Early orchard buildings are being restored, and a large conference center is to be opened early in 1993.

The wide Missouri, at the foot of Central Avenue, attracts visitor interest in the tradition of Nebraska City as a historic river town. It is also enjoyed as a scene of modern river navigation.

By Glenn Noble, with photos sent by Eric Asboe, 1410 First Corso, Nebraska City, NE 18410.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: Frontier Steamboat Town, by Glenn Noble; Nebraska Place Names, Perkey, and History of Nebraska, by Andreas; and "The Correctness of the 1890 Census of Population of Nebraska Cities", by Edgar Z. Palmer, in the Nebraska History Quarterly Magazine, December 1951.

BURR

OTOE COUNTY

Burr can identify its beginnings to those of other "railroad-towns" that were established along the lines being built out across the prairie. However, even before Burr was a town, it was a community with its own postal address. A post office was established on July 15, 1869, named "Burr Oak," for the oak groves in the area. Later, it was spelled as one word—"Burroak."

Surveyors charting a route for a railroad through Otoe County in 1886 crossed land settled by Levi Wilcox, George Strong, Cyrus Bassett, and Captain Ben Pindar. The route was resurveyed, with grading started in 1887. At that time, a town site was platted on the land owned by Winfield and Sarah Holden. One writer suggests that the town's name was chosen by Sarah Holden, whose maiden name was Burrell.

The first train to arrive brought mail and passengers to the depot in September 1888. According to Elton Perkey, the railroad had shortened the name to Burr, to avoid confusion with Burr Oak, Kansas. When the line was completed there were four trains daily — down and back. There were also occasional excursions to Omaha — with round trip tickets costing $1.

Barney Goerke built the first store. Other businesses established in 1888 included the Holden House hotel, a saloon, a hardware store, a general merchandise store, a lumberyard, and two elevators. Various meeting places mentioned over the years include Wilcox Hall in 1889, followed by Landwehr Hall, with Panko Hall listed in 1911. In the late 1920s, Kenneth Chase built a large quonset-type building which was used to present "picture shows" and other gatherings.

The first school for district 101 was built in 1889, with the notation, "....Preaching and meetings were held in the school until the churches were built." A large brick building was constructed in 1935. The last high school graduation, 12 students, was held in 1959. A K-8 school continues to serve the community.

The earliest church, called the "Rockford Charge," was organized in the 1860s and built of rocks on Cyrus Bassett's homestead near the south branch of the Little Nemaha. Rebuilt of lumber on higher ground, the little white church was moved to Burr in 1891 using "home-made equipment." Beer kegs were used to help float it over the creek west of town. Currently known as the Burr United Methodist Church, it celebrated its "centennial plus" in 1971.

The Hopewell Presbyterian Church, established in 1874, was destroyed in the 1913 "Easter Tornado" that ravaged a wide area across southeast Nebraska before striking Omaha where it killed hundreds of people. The church was rebuilt at that location, which is in the center of the Burr-Unadilla-Douglas-Syracuse area, and next to the Hopewell Cemetery. The Hope Lutheran church was established in 1891, and in 1950 the old frame structure was replaced by a large brick one.

Above: The "Easter Tornado" cloud that swept across miles of southeastern Nebraska, March 23, 1913. [Postcard]

Left: Burr's District 101, 1989. [Harris]

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Above: The United Methodist Church at Burr, well into its second century. [Harris]

Right: The post office at Burr, 1990. [Harris]

The large percentage of settlers of German descent is noted in the names of early residents, and the American German Bank, which was organized in 1892 with capital of $9,500. Managed by local stockholders, the bank's name was changed on April 18, 1919, to "The American Bank" due to the anti-German feeling during World War I. A new brick building had been completed earlier that year.

Burr's peak population, 133, occurred in 1920. As rail service declined and was finally abandoned, the need for an all-season road to Burr was evident. After nearly 20 years of work to get the state to provide one, the highway board agreed to build a hard surfaced road "...if the population of Burr reached 100 by 1970." That goal was achieved when the Don Parde family moved to town. This brought the total to 101, which is also the current population. The completion of the Burr Spur on June 8, 1975, was celebrated with a ribbon cutting, a barbecue, a ball game, a street dance, and a fireworks display. Many streets are now paved. and all are graded and maintained.

A quick response team of 14 persons completed training in the 1980s. "This is just another example of how our town exemplifies people-helping-people, to make a better place for all," said Village Clerk Nancy Thormahlen when writing Burr's history for the Otoe County History Book.

From material gleaned from records at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Perkey's Nebraska Place-Names, and the LNM handbook.

Above: Businessmen in the 1890s. Back row (l–r): John Sutton, meat market; D. A. Stoke, hotel; F. P. Hazelton, post office; Dr. Hostetter, physician; Hugh Walker, lumberyard; E. G. Haas, general store; Will Walker, lumberyard; Dr. Ramey, physician; F. Kruse, implements; Mr. Monahan, shoe maker; Will Burnell, pumpman; John Chaney, helper; Harris, loafer; Charlie Marshall, banker; and C. B. Casselman, hardware. Middle row: S. B. Ross, harness maker; John Huffman, barber; Fred Beck and youngster, blacksmith; Prof. Dillon, school teacher; Rev. Comstock, preacher; A. H. Henderson, furniture; Henry McGinley and child, cafe; Ed Daykin, livery barn, Tom Daykin, livery barn; and Will Bishop. hog and cattle buyer. Front row: Mr. Emmerson, painter; Chester Vanderford, painter; Dick Rogers, painter; Pete Garnet, painter; L. L. Sharp, carpenter; Frank Childs, loafer; Ed Fisher, general Store, and Clarence Brunell, boy.

DOUGLAS   OTOE COUNTY

The wild, untapped prairies of Nebraska attracted many people. Hiram Hendricks, a native of Virginia, came to Nebraska in 1856, where with his wife Cicily, he registered a pre-emption claim on 160 acres in the southwest corner of Otoe County. The precinct was named in his honor.

When the county organized, Hendricks became justice of the peace, and their home served as a polling place for

elections — a convenient arrangement since he was a judge over voting procedures from 1859-61. Instrumental in organizing the Methodist Episcopal Church, the couple's home often was the "meeting place" for itinerant preachers.

Life on the prairie was not easy, as evidenced by Hiram Hendricks death on November 21, 1861, at the age of 53, leaving his wife and 11 children to work the farm. By this time many settlers had arrived, which provided some measure of protection for the family. On February 28, 1863, a post office was established and given the name "Hendricks."

In 1864 Irish-born Simpson McKibbon and his bride, Harriet Douglass, settled on a homestead in Hendricks Precinct. In 1872 he added to his holdings by buying a quarter-section of land from Anton Klaus. In a story of his life written many years later, it is noted, "...McKibbon's foresight in settling just where he did was rewarded, when a very short time after, part of this farm was divided up into lots and people were beginning to be convinced it was a good place to settle." It was also noted, "...the Missouri Pacific Railroad was grading its right-of-way."

The town's name evolved during an interesting series of events. A deed (registered in 1887) transferred a strip of land from the McKibbons to the MP. Thomas B. Stevenson, a noted Nebraska City lawyer, was then contacted by McKibbon and Tom Smith to assist in the platting of a village. On June 20, McKibbon received $3,200 for land and seven specific lots "...in the Village of Hendricks." On July 19 Stevenson and his wife Annie signed papers "...dedicating streets, alleys, and highways for public use." The following week, however, lots were being sold in the village, which was now called "Douglas."

Several theories have been suggested as to the reason for the change. Some suggest that the railroad had another station named Hendricks [none found in the records], or that the name "Douglas(s)," the maiden name of the former land-owner, was part of the "deal" when deeding the land to either the railroad or to the Stevensons. Another consideration could be that the first postmaster, George Douglas, was somehow involved. The name of the post office was officially changed from Hendricks to Douglas on October 29, 1888.

An impressive array of businesses sprang into being along the town's main street. A photo, taken in front of the bank in the 1890s, recalls the names and occupations of 30 or more "businessmen," two of which are listed as "loafer."

The town's population reached 305 in 1910. Since then, shifts in population due to economic trends, employment opportunities, and available services are noted in the decades of census records. The current population is 210.

The school, established as soon as there were families enough to warrant it, grew from a one-room structure to an accredited K-12 institution. Reduced by low enrollment to a K-6 for many years, District 44 will merge with the Sterling school system in May 1993.

Celebrating its centennial in 1988, Douglas proudly published the "Centennial Yearbook," stories of its history, and took stock of the many interesting and important events during the first 100 years of its life.

From material supplied by F. K. Smith, librarian, Douglas Community School, Douglas, NE 68344.


Above: An old building, which housed many businesses: Those identified by the fading paint include the Farmers Creamery and Groceries, the Beatrice Creamery receiving station, and more recently a gas and tire company. The second story probably provided space for a lodge hall and/or opera house. [Harris]

Above: This structure, built into a hill, is of much newer vintage. [Harris]

Right: A main street florist shop, 1989. [Harris]

Below: The Douglas Schoolhouse with one-story addition. [Harris]
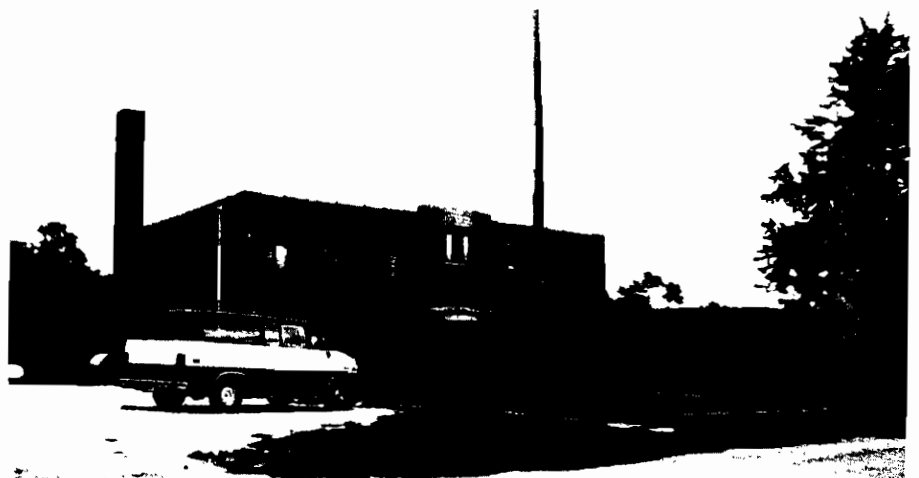
DUNBAR

OTOE COUNTY

A town was founded in 1856 at the intersecting property lines of four farms, whose owners were John Dunbar, Thomas Dunbar, Mrs. J. Wilson, and John McGinley. A settlement began as a ranch house and barn owned by Thomas Wilson, which was a stopping place for the overland stage. Green cotton-wood lumber was brought in by oxen from Nebraska City, and soon there were houses and many businesses.

Initially called "Wilson," a post office was commissioned under that name on May 16, 1866. In 1867 plans for the Midland Pacific Railway from Nebraska City to the Union Pacific in Hamilton County were announced. However, rails were not immediately laid, and it was April 1871 before trains were operating as far as Lincoln.

For a very short time, the name of the station was changed to "Dennison." (Both were probably rejected since Wilson and Dennison were names of other Nebraska towns.) On April 2, 1874, the name was changed to "Dunbar," for John Dunbar, oldest resident of the community. The town celebrated its centennial in 1956 — 100 years from its initial founding.

The great Dunbar train robbery occurred on January 11, 1887. A passenger train carrying $17,000 in silver bullion was deliberately derailed one-half mile north of Dunbar. The men responsible for the wreck, which killed the train's engineer and injured many others, were caught. Called "the Crime of the Century," one man was hanged and the other was given ten years of hard labor.

When the town was established, a school was organized to help it grow. In time, a secondary school was added, with the first graduating class in 1893. There have been three buildings since then. The present school, built in 1915, is still at the top of the hill, now part of the Syracuse-Dunbar-Avoca district. John Reese, well-known author for the Saturday Evening Post, is a graduate of Dunbar High.

By the early 1920s Dunbar's population was well over 300. There were two or more hotels, banks, and elevators, and numerous shops. There was also a cement plant, a cheese factory, and "day service" for freight to and from the depot. "The Dunbar Review" was published weekly, there were four churches, and a park where a two-day picnic was held annually. The dance hall was called "the Hyppodrome." In addition to lodge rooms, the Masonic Hall was used for traveling medicine shows, movies, and the junior and senior class plays.
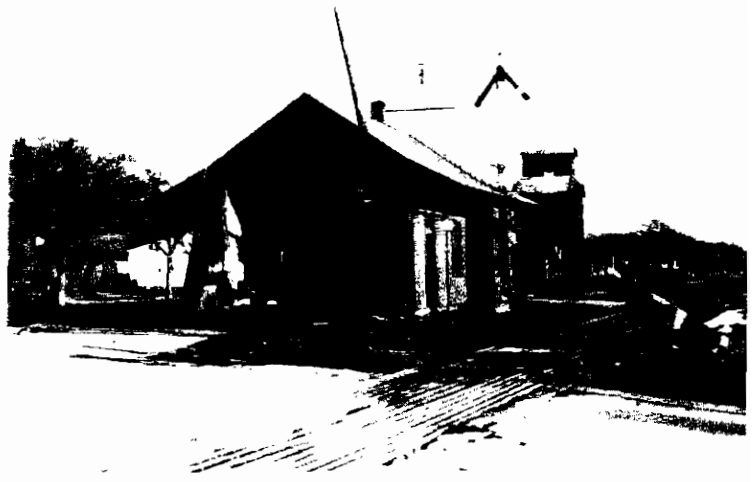

Above: Dunbar's schools helped the town to grow. This schoolhouse is now part of the Syracuse-Dunbar-Avoca system. [Harris]

Left: Four Dunbar women standing atop a huge log at the saw mill in the east part of town, 1920. [Roos]

Damage from the 1950 flood.
Left: One of seven home which were washed away.
Below: The Dunbar Depot, heavily damaged in the flood. [Roos]

Dunbar had a large stockyard next to the railroad and many cattle were driven in to be shipped to market. The story goes that after a successful round-up, one cowboy decided to ride his horse through the swinging doors of one of the local establishments, which caused a great uproar.

Dunbar experienced a devastating flood on May 8, 1950. Two lives were lost when seven homes, the dance hall, and a filling station were washed away. The depot, many homes, and several Main Street businesses received heavy damage. Most were not replaced, which was a further loss to the town.

In August 1965 the Highway 2 bypass was opened around Dunbar. The 1.7 mile curve, which routed traffic around one of the steepest main streets in the Midwest, benefited through traffic, but caused a hardship for the stores and stations in town. Highway 67, which runs north-south, still carries a fairly heavy line of traffic through town.

In recent years, our town celebrates "Dunbar Days" on the second weekend in August. In 1991 the town purchased Christmas decorations — first time ever. Street signs were also erected.

Dunbar's highest population, 336, was recorded in 1940. Present-day Dunbar has a population of 172, the majority of whom are employed in Nebraska City, Syracuse, or Tecumseh. The area supports a volunteer fire department, a post office, a sizable co-op elevator, several independent businesses, and the Dun-Bar. The BN trains still go by, but the depot is a thing of the past.

Dunbar is still a pretty little town with many large trees. We have a Presbyterian Church and, in addition to our well-kept and attractive older homes, there are some newer ones. Dunbar may be short in area of population than before, and there are fewer business, but our town is long on "nice town to live in."

By Helen Roos, Box 85, Dunbar, NE 68346.

Right: Dunbar United Presbyterian Church. [Roos]

Below: The Lodge Hall in Dunbar, location of plays, medicine shows, and movies for many years. [Roos]

Below: Dunbar High School graduation class of 1936 reunian, held in 1986. [Roos]

Left: The Dunbar Post Office, 1992. [Harris]

LORTON   OTOE COUNTY

Platted in 1881, our town was given the name "Delta." Its post office was established on June 26, 1882. When the Missouri Pacific Railway built a north-south connecting line from Talmage to Weeping Water, it came right through Delta.

While establishing the right-of-way, however, railroad officials informed the town that its name had to be changed since it had a station by that name in Kansas. While everyone was happy to get a railroad, no one wanted to change the name of the town, so no action was taken. The railroad — determined in their decision — chose its own name for the station, calling it "Cio."

For several years, the town had two names. The post office had no problem with the original name, since the other Delta was in another state. Mail was addressed to Delta, but freight had to be directed to Cio. When traveling, passengers also had to remember to identify their destination by its station name — not that of the town. This was obviously a very confusing situation.

In time, the people decided to find a name that would be acceptable to all. Robert Lorton, a wholesale grocery salesman from Nebraska City who called on local merchants at that time, was well-liked, and since there were no other towns by that name in Nebraska or on the MP line, the people chose the name "Lorton." On November 6, 1894, the name — approved by both the federal and railroad authorities — was officially changed.

During its first 25 years, Lorton was a thriving railroad town, with four trains a day. The 1900 census lists the village with a population of 290. There was a Baptist church, an opera house, a hotel, a bank, a doctor's office, a blacksmith shop, two grocery stores (one with general merchandise), a pharmacist, a hardware store, a lumberyard, a livery stable, two taverns, a millinery shop, a dressmaking establishment, a harness shop, two elevators, and a stockyard.

Because of its location away from major east-west routes, Lorton became pretty-much a self contained community. At one time, over 60 children were enrolled in Lorton's school. As roads improved, and the economy of the state and nation changed, the need for the railroad and railroad-towns diminished. A number of businesses that closed during the 1930s and World War II did not reopen. When the 1950 flood washed out the tracks, it ended train service to Lorton and the elevator closed.
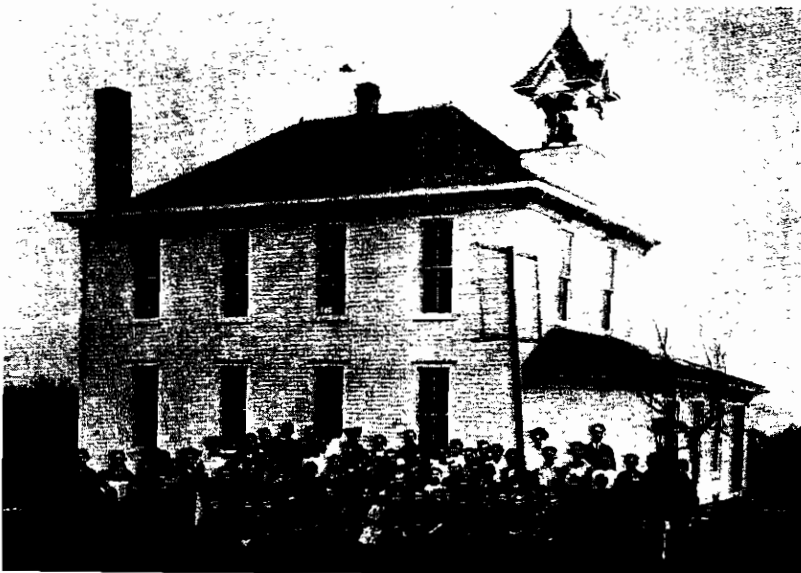
Above: Lorton School, ca. 1900. [Meyer]

Right: Snapshot of railroad depot (far left) the elevators, and a nearby home. [Meyer]