

In the beginning . . . Controversy part of UNL's past

By Douglas Engh
Staff Reporter

When the University of Nebraska first opened its doors for business in the fall of 1871 it was already a hot seat for controversy as well as higher learning.

The original 1869 legislature bill establishing the university suffered arguments that the state should be more concerned with high schools than colleges, that church denominations should be responsible for higher education, and that Nebraska had too small a population (100,000) to justify the expense.

Proponents argued that it was never too early to start a university, that many distinguished East Coast colleges started in this way — Harvard and Yale were given as examples — and that Nebraska had a "proud history" of free common schooling. The new university was seen as the logical complement to this history.

With the federal government's Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, Nebraska was allowed to claim and sell 90,000 acres of public domain to be used to finance education in the state. But with the problems surrounding early statehood, land was not selected until 1871, long after most of the prime land was already claimed.

Even so, claims of inflated land speculation frightened many into believing that much of western Nebraska would soon be owned by "a few rich Eastern capitalists." Others countered that the land sales would give the state a university without any tax burden.

The endowment, mostly in northeast Nebraska, didn't realize the intended financial security, and was used to not only finance the new university but also the State House, insane asylum, and penitentiary raising cries of fund mismanagement. Nebraska's first governor David Butler was impeached for this and other charges.



Under the chancellorship of Dr. A.R. Benton, enrollment showed steady growth, but the problems were far from over. As with many state buildings constructed at this time, University Hall was found to have been hastily built of inferior materials.

After six years, extensive work on the foundation and other supporting structures had to be undertaken. These expenses cut into program improvements and faculty salaries.

As the university grew in size and more buildings were added, University Hall was converted into general use classrooms and finally razed in 1948 to make room for Ferguson Hall.



Eric Gregory/Daily Nebraskan

West entrance to the new Animal Science Building on East Campus. Construction is scheduled to be completed this fall.

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