

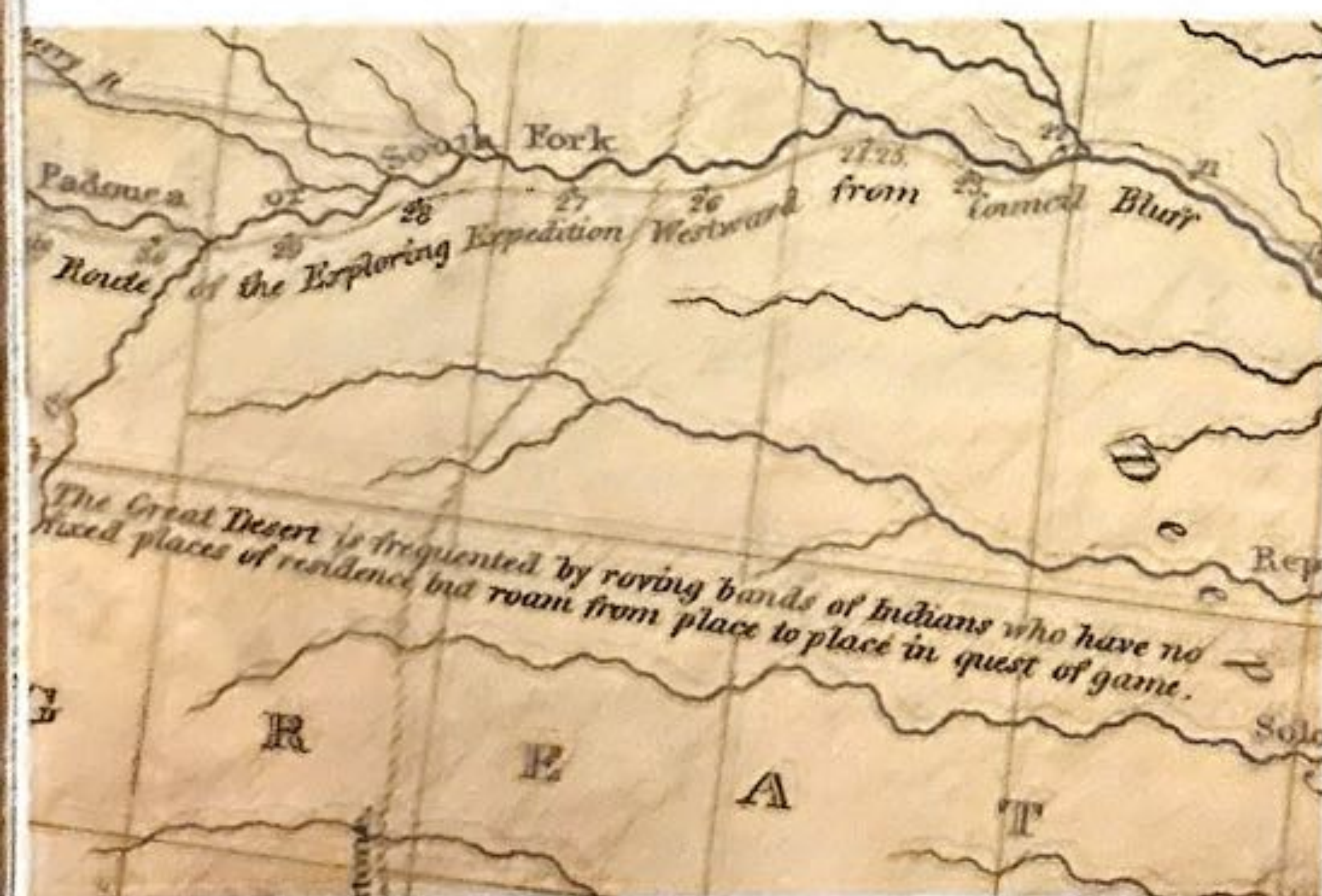
When Rain Followed

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Rainfall follows the plow” is one of the most consequential ideas in Nebraska history. That doesn’t mean it was a good idea.

For centuries, Nebraska’s Native American inhabitants planted corn in the east and hunted bison in the west. When a U.S. military expedition crossed the region in 1820, the soldiers noted the lack of trees and the increasingly arid conditions as they moved west. After that, maps labeled the Great Plains as the GREAT DESERT. The region was “almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence,” in the words of an early geographer.

As a result, the U.S. government was happy to leave the Great Plains as a permanent “Indian Country” into which displaced eastern tribes could be moved. But by the 1850s, the U.S. was planning to build a transcontinental railroad through that region and opened it to settlement. Following the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of settlers poured into the new state of Nebraska, pushing ever farther west into



Detail of a map from Stephen Long's 1820 expedition. The South Platte River runs along the top; today the spot numbered 22 is the location of the city of North Platte. The future Nebraska and Kansas are labeled GREAT DESERT.

STEPHEN H. LONG AND EDWIN JAMES, "COUNTRY DRAINED BY THE MISSISSIPPI" (1823)

country with less and less rain. West of the 100th meridian (in other words, west of Cozad), rainfall averaged less than 20 inches a year. Good luck farming with that.

In 1880, a University of Nebraska professor named Samuel Aughey published a book explaining how plowing the prairie

the Plow



"Using all the farm for crops — plowing corn in door yard." Custer County, 1888. Photo by Solomon D. Butcher. NSHS RG2608-0-20235

would allow rain to penetrate more deeply. Plowed land would soak up rain like a sponge. The broken sod would slowly evaporate moisture, which would create more rain. In the words of another writer, "rainfall follows the plow."

Railroads and town boosters had a strong incentive

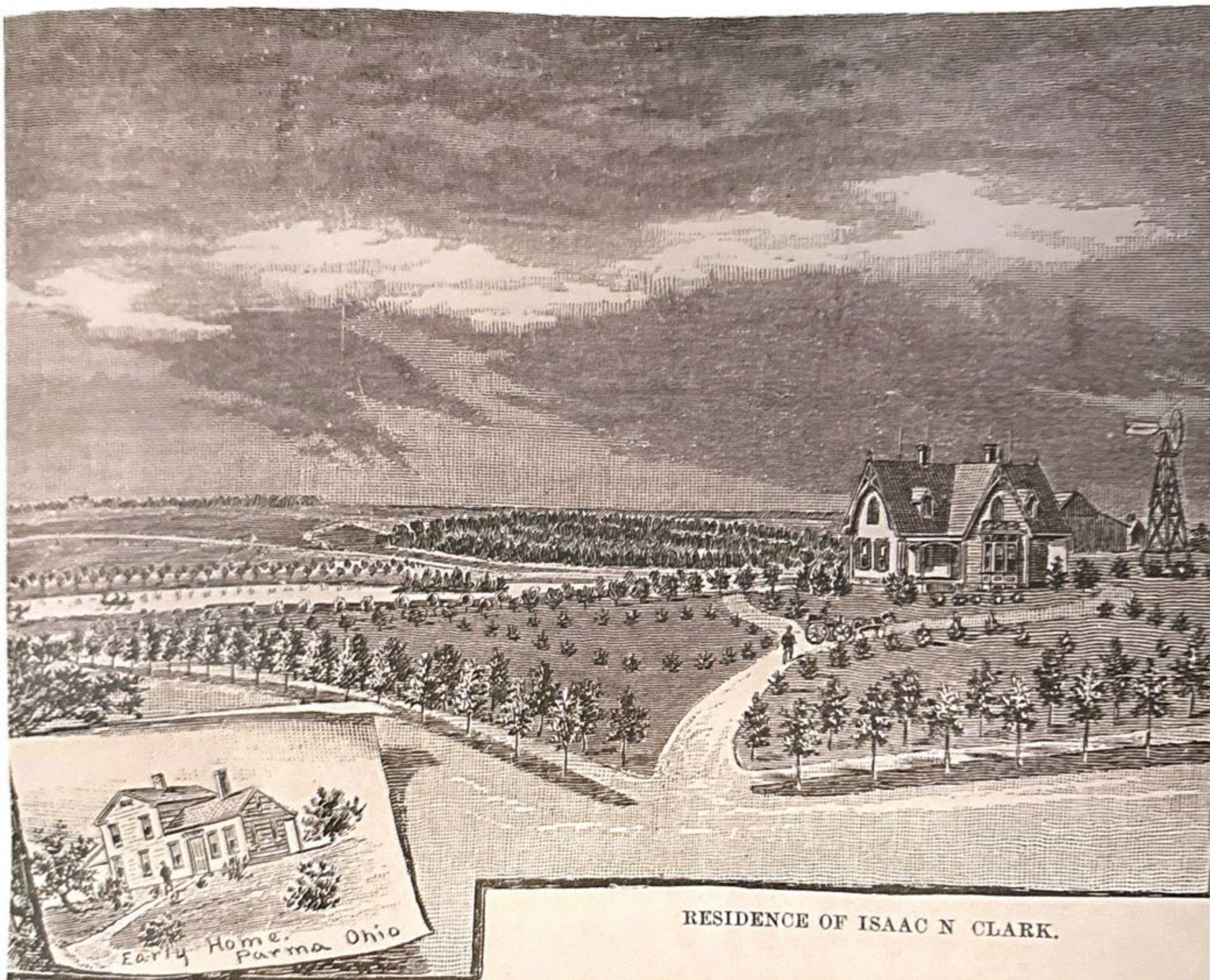
to promote Nebraska's land and climate, and they were enthusiastic for this new, scientific-sounding explanation. The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad even paid a stenographer to record Professor Aughey's speeches, printing them as pamphlets to be distributed as far away as Europe.



When rain didn't follow the plow in the 1890s, Nebraska communities hired professional rainmakers who used explosives, smoke and chemical reactions to create rain. It didn't work but sometimes they got lucky. NSHS RG2545-0-9



"Farmers attending a siphon tube irrigation demonstration," Clay County, Nebraska, 1948. Soil Conservation Service photo. NSHS RG2570-1B-45



A Clay County farm, showing its owners' humbler previous residence in Ohio. Published in 1882, A.T. Andreas' "History of the State of Nebraska" is full of flattering images of prosperous farms, usually shown with plantings of trees.

And for several years in the 1880s, it all seemed to be true. Rainfall really did increase across Nebraska even as more land was plowed. A modern scientist would have warned people not to confuse correlation with causality, but nobody worried too much about that.

Then came the drought years of the 1890s, which were worse than anything most non-Indigenous people had seen. The new settlers hadn't lived here long enough to know that such extremes are normal. And in many cases, they didn't even know the area's recent history. In his book "The Last Days of the Rainbelt," geographer David Wishart writes that due to recurring drought, some parts of the high plains (including southwestern Nebraska) were settled and abandoned by "three or more waves of homesteaders before successful farming took root."

THE RAINFALL

is ample for all human needs. In the eastern division of the North Platte country the annual rainfall of the last decade has exceeded *thirty-two inches*. In the middle division it reaches *twenty-eight inches*, and in the western division *twenty-four inches*. Still further west, in the unsettled counties, it runs from sixteen to twenty inches, with a very marked yearly increase. The rains of Nebraska are not so long and excessive as in many of the older states, but they are vastly more equable in distribution.

From the promotional material on the back of "Map of Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Lands in Nebraska, Columbus District, 1890." NSHS M782 1890 B92b

Most of the Great Plains became cattle country. Successful farming in arid regions came only after the development of irrigation. Rain doesn't follow the plow, but you might say the plow follows the center pivot. 

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