Before The Beginning

Edward Creighton

Omaha was a shanty town of perhaps 800 people when Edward Creighton arrived in 1856. It had a two-story frame hotel and just one brick structure, the new Territorial Building. Nevertheless, Edward must have seen the little boom town as the logical base camp for many new developments stretching out over the vast western territories.1

He has sent an older brother Joseph, and a cousin, James Creighton, ahead. Presumably he sent back favorable word because he was soon followed by his youngest brother, John Andrew, and eventually by other cousins, nephews and friends. By the time John A. arrived, work was progressing on another frame hotel and a Catholic church (also built of brick). Within a year Omaha had doubled its size to 1600.2 Timing for the Creightons could not have been better. Within the next 20 years, Omaha became a railroad center, a banking and business center, a distribution center, and, with special thanks to Edward, a communication center. In another 20 years, a successful Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition would impress 2.6 million visitors, including President McKinley.

The careers of the Creighton brothers followed the American hero tradition of humble beginnings to riches. The father, James Creighton, had arrived from County Monaghan, Ireland, in 1805. Six years later he married Bridget Hughes, an Irish lass from County Armagh. It is recorded that they lived one year in Pittsburgh, but then moved to what was frontier country in Ohio. While creating their farm, working hard and living off the land, they also raised nine children. Edward, born in 1820, was the fifth child; John Andrew, born in 1831, was the ninth. In that time and location the available schooling was limited and informal, and the older children did not attempt more than the three "R's," although they added much to their education on their own in later years.3

By age 14 Edward was working with teams at road building, a readily available job in a frontier society. As a "cart boy" working on the road, it is recorded that one of his associates was Phil Sheridan, later famous as General Sheridan during the Civil War.4

Edward's father gave him, at age 18, the help he needed with the gift of a wagon and team of horses. With this equipment, he immediately became a freighter and had no difficulty obtaining employment at various busy construction sites in Ohio and nearby. As people moved steadily westward, roads, railroads and canals were contracted for and built at a rapid rate to accommodate steady development of the area. Edward earned money, saved it, made contacts and learned skills through observation and experience. In 1840, at just 20 years of age, he secured a contract for construction of a stage road from Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia), to
Springfield, Ohio. Following this, a succession of contracting jobs were completed, and in 1847 he became interested in the new business of constructing telegraph lines. He served first as a contractor for hauling telegraph poles and then as a superintendent for line construction in areas as far east as Pittsburgh and as far south as New Orleans.

For the next few years Edward’s energy and success brought profit. He had acquired a stock of 40 teams and was sought after to serve as superintendent for various contract jobs. In 1855, after completing a contract for grading streets in Toledo, Ohio, he received a contract for grading part of the North Missouri Railroad bed and moved his teams to Missouri. This turned out to be a disappointment, and he gave up the job after having difficulties with the work engineer. He moved his teams to Keokuk, Iowa, to complete another contract for street grading, but there was a change in the city council; the plan to grade the streets was revoked, and Edward was again disappointed. These two disappointments proved to be most beneficial to Omaha because Edward decided to sell his teams and seek his fortune in the new territory of Nebraska.

After deciding to settle in Omaha, he began to plan for a family of his own. He returned to Dayton, Ohio, where in October of 1856 he married Mary Lucretia Wareham. Rather than bring his bride to muddy and still primitive Omaha at the beginning of a winter, he chose to spend the next few months with her in Pittsburgh. In the spring of 1857, he arranged to transport a steamboat loaded with lumber from Pittsburgh down the Ohio and up the Missouri. Finished lumber was in demand in the growing city of Omaha and sold at a good profit. Following this, he acquired and soon completed successful contracts to build telegraph lines from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Fort Smith, Arkansas, and to Omaha. By 1860 Edward was recognized locally as a most successful businessman and contractor. He had become associated with the Western Union Telegraph Company, recently created by the gradual assimilation of smaller companies and destined to become the great name in the rapidly expanding telegraph communication business. By 1858 Edward had also formed a partnership with two brothers, Herman and Augustus Kountze. Land developers interested in starting a banking business, they needed capital which Edward provided, and eventually the First National Bank of Omaha was created. Edward served as its first President.
By 1858 gold had been discovered in Colorado, and Omaha, on the main route of march to the gold fields, continued to boom with the needs for transportation, supply and communication for western development. Edward was well established in Omaha, having built a modest home on the north side of Chicago Street between 17th and 18th Streets. Brothers Joseph and John Andrew were also established in Omaha, along with cousins Harry and James Creighton. In one way or another, all became involved in various enterprises in building, stock raising, freighting and retail sales. The Creighton family also became much involved in city and territory planning and development. As noted in a biographic review by Robert Fell:

Law and order had not been well established in the new territory, so the Creighton brothers joined others in forming the “Near-Vigilance Committee” which, among other things, tried to make citizens pay their debts. A Catholic priest arrived, and all the Creighton brothers contributed money and lumber to build him a house. Politics became important in the new Territory, and Edward served as a delegate to the Democratic County Convention. Cousin James was appointed a city councilman by the mayor, an arrangement that complemented Edward’s civic activities.

By 1859 and 1860, activity in the telegraph business increased because of national interest in creating a transcontinental line. California had a line going into Nevada, and the California Legislature granted a subsidy to any company that would connect a line to it from the East. Competitors made plans from other locations, but Creighton and Western Union were successful, largely due to Edward’s personal efforts. A line had been completed from Omaha as far as Ft. Kearny. Edward journeyed to Ft. Kearny in November 1860 and, by the end of the year, surveyed the land through Wyoming’s South Pass and Fort Bridger to Salt Lake City. In Salt Lake City, he established what was to be a lasting friendship with Brigham Young and won his support in creating the line from Omaha through Salt Lake City to connect with the California company. During that same winter, Creighton went on alone, travelling by mule from Salt Lake City to Carson City and eventually to Sacramento. There, arrangements were made with the California companies to plan construction from both ends. To insure competitive interest, the companies agreed that until the entire line was constructed, the full tariff for messages between Omaha and San Francisco would go to the company first completing its line to Salt Lake City. Edward Creighton’s crews won that competition, arriving in Salt Lake City in October 1861, and by October 24 the first transcontinental message was possible.

Edward then continued his numerous business ventures, and Omaha and the Creightons prospered. Since their only child, Charles, had died at age four, Edward and Mary Lucretia directed increasing attention to charities and local civic needs. Mary was particularly active in these efforts, and for several years Edward would supply her with as much as $25 a day (a magnificent sum in those days) to distribute or buy things for the poor. Edward also expressed a wish to start a college where Catholic boys might have an opportunity for a free education, but these plans were not developed during his lifetime. In 1871 he suffered a stroke but made a good recovery. In November 1874 while working at the bank, he suffered another massive stroke and died two days later, November 5, 1874, at age fifty-four.
Mary Lucretia survived Edward by less than two years, but during that time she remembered her husband's wish to found a free school. Edward had died intestate, but his widow made the decisions regarding the disposition of his property. Various family members were chief recipients, but in her will, she specifically designated $100,000 for the building and endowment of a college which, when completed, was to be conveyed to the Catholic Bishop of Omaha. By the time the college was built, the endowment fund had grown to $147,500.

Mary Lucretia's will specified such details as the following. "To purchase the site for a school . . . and erect proper buildings thereon for a school of the class and grade of a College, expending in the purchase of said site and the building of said buildings, and in and about the same, not to exceed one-half of said sum, and to invest the remainder in securities, the interest of which shall be applied to the support and maintenance; and the principle shall be kept forever inviolate. . . The said school shall be known as the Creighton College and is designated by me as a memorial of my late husband. I have selected this mode of testifying to his virtues and my affection to his memory, because such a work was one which he, in his lifetime, proposed to himself."

Acting on this, the executors, John and James Creighton and Herman Kountze, purchased the site and erected what is now part of the Administration Building. The entire property and securities were duly conveyed by the executors to the Rt. Rev. James O'Connor, D.D., Bishop of Omaha, July 1, 1879. A few months later, the Nebraska Legislature passed an Act (February 27, 1879) "to provide for the incorporation of universities under certain circumstances." Following the provisions of this Act, Father O'Connor vested the entire property and securities of the Creighton College in a corporation, designating the legal title of said corporation to be The Creighton University, and appointing five members of the Society of Jesus to constitute the Board of Trustees. The Creighton University was so incorporated on August 14, 1879. Creighton University thus became the first endowed Catholic college west of the Mississippi.¹¹ Edward's dream of a free school could not realistically be carried far into the 20th century. Some special fees had to be collected as the cost of providing education grew over the decades. Even so, the undergraduate school did succeed in remaining tuition free until the 1920's. Today (1991), although the tuition to the Medical School is far from free, it ranks as one of the lowest tuitions among private medical schools.

John A. Creighton

John Andrew Creighton had the benefit of something his older brother hadn't, a more formal education. At the time he was growing up, better schools were available in Ohio, an advantage his mother appreciated. Her Catholic faith was strong, and although she had little education herself, Bridget was determined that the younger children would have more schooling and that John Andrew would have a Catholic college education.
When John was just ten years of age, his father died. Edward, executor of his father’s estate, agreed with his mother to set aside $600 for John’s college tuition. At age twenty, John enrolled at Saint Joseph’s College, a Dominican institution in Somerset, Ohio. He completed two years of college with plans to become a civil engineer. Bridget’s death, however, in 1854, caused John Andrew to return home for a period of time to manage property and family matters. At the same time, brother Edward had become very busy working on a number of contracts, had acquired much equipment and many teams of horses and needed help in their management. John chose to join him rather than return to college. The death of Bridget and the move of John Andrew to join Edward loosened many of the ties that had bound the brothers to Ohio. This factor, in addition to Edward’s disappointments in Missouri and Iowa, most likely influenced their decision to move to Nebraska in 1856.

John A. Creighton arrived in Omaha as his brother was planning to depart for Dayton to get married. His first job was as a clerk in a wearing apparel store where it was reported that “his pleasant personality soon made him a popular merchant, and he was acquiring property before the year was out.” John and brother Edward were always very close. John never acquired the renown that Edward gained for establishing the first transcontinental telegraph, but in some respects, he was more successful. His good fortunes were often linked to those of his brother, but independently he had many business interests, acquired much property and made investments which were often remarkably rewarding. At the time of the Colorado gold rush, he established an ox cart freighting business to Denver which was very risky but highly profitable. At Edward’s request John helped with the construction of the telegraph line to Salt Lake City and after its completion, went to the Fort Bridger, Wyoming, area to round up and sell all the stray cattle which had been attached to the various telegraph construction crews. With the money from this, he purchased a wagon train of merchandise which he sold to Brigham Young for $20,000. With that capital, he headed for Virginia City, Montana, with thirty-five wagons of merchandise. At that time this was one of the wildest cities in the West, surrounded by gold strikes, silver strikes and lawlessness. With his merchandise and capital, John saw a great opportunity and opened a store for the sale of miners’ supplies. This proved as successful as any of his other ventures.
Intriguing stories are told about his experiences in Virginia City. A number of local murderers and robbers were flagrantly organized under the leadership of a Mr. Henry Plummer, who had gotten himself elected sheriff of the county. It has been estimated that this group of "road agents" committed as many as 100 murders. To deal with this situation, five men, including John Andrew, met and organized a vigilante committee. Once established, the committee increased rapidly and saw to it that serious offenders were brought to speedy trial. Some found guilty were executed, on one occasion three in one day. Over a two-year period, the situation was much improved, but at its start, the reform movement endured threats and other oppositions from gang members. It is recorded that on the evening of the day following the first hanging of a desperado, a Mr. W. T. Sanders, who later became the first senator from Montana, was in Creighton's store. A friend of the just-deceased robber came in and his insulting language made it plain he was seeking the life of Mr. Sanders, who had been especially active in having the trial set up. Sanders remained cool, did not leave, made some comments in response, and the bandit drew his revolver. Meanwhile, John Creighton had not been idle. He immediately yelled the following (but using language the road agent understood more clearly), "I have the drop on you; Mr. Sanders is my guest, and I mean to protect him. Now, you leave this store--right away!" The man put up his revolver and left.

Another encounter with road agents was the following. About midnight, John, who slept in the store, was awakened by loud knocking. "Who's there?" - No answer. "What do you want?" "We want the doctor." (a doctor who had been John Creighton's guest had fortunately left that evening on a sick call.) "The doctor isn't home. He's gone on a sick call." This reply was followed by some mutterings and finally more knocking after which a voice said, "Say, Creighton! We want to buy some whiskey." "Oh! I don't sell whiskey." There was more consultation outside which allowed John time to place two loaded, double-barreled shotguns on the counter and get his revolver handy. "Creighton!" "What do you want?" "Say, Creighton, there's a feller out here as wants to pay you a sack of flour he got the other day." Came the reply - "Yes? Well, now I tell you. A man that will come around at this hour of the night to pay a bill is honest and so I'll trust him until tomorrow. Good night!" After more muttering, the road agents mounted their horses and rode away.

In one incident John A. was appointed a Colonel by General Thomas Meagher, then acting Governor of Montana Territory. The occasion followed an Indian uprising in the Yellowstone area. General Meagher called for 800 volunteers, and John Creighton was appointed Colonel to serve as Commissary General. But the need for the Brigade disappeared before it was completely organized, and the Colonel was honorably discharged after a brief term of service.

During his stay in Virginia City, John A. made many investments in mining interests which paid off later with very handsome returns. But in 1868 despite his good business in Virginia City, John decided it was time to return to Omaha and establish a family.
He had made occasional trips to Omaha during his Montana years and during one of these visits in 1863 he met Sarah Emily Wareham, the younger sister of Edward's wife, Mary Lucretia. She was a very pretty young lady. He was handsome. Mutual attraction developed into romance and eventually into plans for marriage. Perhaps one attraction John had for Sarah was a beard which he kept the rest of his life and which adds another interesting item in John Andrew's history. During his adventurous years freighting and helping to build the telegraph line, he had many contacts with native Americans and often had to travel through what was then dangerous Indian territory. He noted that the smooth-faced Indians seemed to respect and be a little in awe of the white man who had a long beard, so he decided to grow one for himself. It was reported that the Indians came to regard him as a mystic.

John and Sarah were married on June 9, 1868. At this time he began a partnership in a grocery business. Two years later, he became senior member of a firm shipping merchandise to Corrine, Utah, where it was unloaded from the train and freighted to Montana. His former connections at Virginia City were still important and serving him well.

When brother Edward died in 1874, John A. was very helpful in settling the estate, receiving some inheritance himself. One of Edward's successful ventures had been the development of a cattle herd in western Nebraska, and following his death, the herd was sold at private auction. John A., with the assistance of some friends, bought the herd for $75,000. They continued to manage the herd, and when the stock had been considerably increased on the open range and interest in the cattle industry was at its height, they sold the herd for $700,000. This involvement in cattle led him to become one of the chief organizers in the company which established the stockyards in Omaha, eventually recognized as the largest in the world.

Later in his life, John A. Creighton was a Vice President of the First National Bank, owned a large interest in the Omaha Street Railway Company, and was President of the Stockyards National Bank and of the People's Savings Bank of Butte, Montana.

John Creighton's success in acquiring a fortune was nicely balanced by his enthusiasm in giving it away. Sarah Emily and John had one child, a daughter Lucretia, "Lulu", born in 1869, who died just eleven months later. One may speculate that John's interest in founding a medical school and a hospital was influenced by the illness and early death of close family members. His father died when he was only...
ten, his mother when he was twenty-two, his only child and his brother’s only child in the first few years of life. His brother Edward died of a stroke at just fifty-four, and his wife Mary Lucretia died of dropsy less than two years later. John’s wife, Sarah Emily, suffered several years from arthritis and died in 1888 at just forty-seven years of age.

Before her death, Sarah, like her sister Mary, had become much involved in charity work. Because of her arthritis, she was not able to make frequent visits in person as Mary had, but it is reported that her friends would gather news of the needs of the poor and through them she would help as she could. She also took on special projects to fill the lonely days following the death of her loved ones. On some occasions, when there was a death or illness in an Omaha household, Sarah would quietly appear, express her sympathy and move about the house doing whatever needed to be done to get things in order. A very religious woman, she was a member of the choir at St. John’s Church, donating two of the altars there in memory of her parents. She also directed other gifts toward Catholic churches around the city.

Sarah Emily took an active interest in Creighton University as well. On a visit to the school, she noticed that the Jesuit living quarters were primitive. She met with her husband and the Reverend Dowling, S.J., President, and together they arrived at a $13,000 gift to construct the south wing of the Administration Building, which provided improved quarters.

Following her death, it was discovered that Sarah Emily had specified in her will that $50,000 be used to build a new St. Joseph Hospital. To this John Andrew added $150,000 to make the new hospital a fitting tribute to his wife. Construction began and the cornerstone for the hospital was laid in 1890.

For the rest of his life, John contributed princely amounts in charity, most of them never recorded, since many were spontaneous and out-of-pocket. It is evident that he preferred to give away his wealth while he could see the immediate results. Among his better known donations was the convent he had constructed for the Poor Clare Nuns and a home for working girls. In addition to the building of the John A. Creighton Medical College, at the behest of the Omaha Bar, he aided a Law School and eventually constructed a building which at one time housed the Law School, Pharmacy School and Dental School.

On his 75th birthday, he gave a large party attended by many people, who were entertained by the Creighton band. Instead of receiving gifts, he announced another gift to Creighton University of $400,000 worth of real estate. On that occasion he was reported to have said, “I have one child, and that is Creighton University, and I think that since the early 80’s, when it was founded by my brother Edward and his wife, it has grown into pretty lusty manhood.” His gifts to Creighton University amounted to more than $2,000,000.

A few months after this on Thursday, February 7, 1907, John Andrew Creighton died. The funeral from St. John’s Church was described as massive. One of the pallbearers was William Jennings Bryan. Creighton students formed an honor...
John Creighton's birthday party, 1907. At John Creighton's 75th birthday party, the Creighton University Band shows off its new uniforms, a gift from the Count.

The John A. Creighton funeral, 1907. One of Dr. Negret Orndoe's men.
guard and a parallel memorial service was held in the Creighton Auditorium next to the church. More than 120 carriages formed the funeral procession. Three thousand persons filled the street when the hearse arrived. During his life John Creighton received special honors and international recognition for his generosity. Pope Leo XIII knighted him in the Order of St. Gregory and later elevated him to the rank of Papal Count in the Holy Roman Empire. From that date, his friends were pleased to refer to him as Count Creighton. In 1900 he was honored by the University of Notre Dame by presentation of the Laetare Medal. This medal is still on display in Creighton's Administration Building, a cherished possession of the University. An article on the significance of the award was written by Alvin Cooner in an issue of the Creighton magazine Shadoux. The word Laetare means rejoice and is the name given the middle Sunday of Lent, when church members are encouraged to rejoice because Lent is half over. The medal was so named because on that Sunday the University of Notre Dame announced to whom the gift would be presented for that year. It was to be given to the most distinguished Catholic of the United States, be he poor or rich, a divine, a literary critic or any other vocation so long as he had especially distinguished himself in Catholic service. The President of Notre Dame, Reverend A. Morrissey, came to Omaha to present the medal to John Creighton in a ceremony on May 1, 1900. Two interesting details concerning the presentation were recorded. Anticipation of the ceremony had occasioned the installation of a permanent system of electric lights in that part of the Administration Building leading to a large room used as an entertainment hall. Also Father Rigge, who was present at the ceremony, reported later that Count Creighton was a great socializer and raconteur but not comfortable addressing an audience. He had planned a modest response of "I thank you for the gift, gentlemen" and planned to give it eloquently, but halfway through his seven-word speech, he forgot the other half so took his seat. Nevertheless, the audience applauded vehemently. The remains of the Creighton brothers and their wives now rest in the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery at 49th and Leavenworth Streets. It was said that before trees and buildings obscured the view, the tall Creighton family monument could be seen from the top floor of the Creighton Administration Building. Creighton Influence Continues Since the Creighton brothers had much to do with the development of the city itself as well as our University, numerous reports and anecdotes exist, some of them perhaps apocryphal, about their adventures, attitudes, influence and achievements in developing or promoting various business, social and civic projects. For example, the Creighton name is tied to telegraphy rather than railroading, but the work in establishing the first transcontinental telegraph had much influence on the location
James Creighton, cousin to Edward and John of the first transcontinental railroad, and the strength and location of the Union Pacific and connecting lines owes much to the Creightons' efforts.

Creighton's name was carried to war in a special way. In March 1945 a 455-foot armed cargo vessel was launched and christened the S.S. Creighton Victory. The principal speaker at the christening in Portland, Oregon, was a Medical School graduate, James P. Foley (M.D. 1932), who read this message from the University President, Thomas Bowdern, S.J.:

The Creighton University sponsors with pride the good ship S.S. Creighton Victory. If we deserve this honor, we acknowledge that it has been earned for us by the 2,600 Creighton men and women in the armed forces. In gratitude to them, we dedicate this ship to them, especially to the 100 gold stars who have died that we might live.

Its maiden voyage was delivering war materials to the Philippines, and it continued many voyages around the Pacific and to Europe before being mothballed with other victory ships after the Korean Conflict.

In addition to the Creighton brothers, many friends and relatives came to Omaha because of the brothers' influence, and in various ways contributed to the development and progress of Omaha and the University. One of the more illustrious or at least better known was cousin James "Long Jim" Creighton who worked closely with both Edward and John in construction of the telegraph line. He was appointed to the first city council when Omaha was incorporated and was re-elected a number of terms. He was also a member of the state legislature of 1877 and was named a trustee of the Creighton College Endowment. In 1882, the mayor appointed him Chairman of the first Board of Public Works, and it was under his direction that Omaha first "laid in streets" (evidently with brick).

There is no question that the Creighton brothers were stalwart and handled themselves well in sometimes dangerous situations. Their age, however, generated many fictionalized stories of the wild west. One of Zane Grey's popular books was *Western Union*. The hero of the story was invented, but the Creightons are identified by name and are very important figures in the book. In Zane Grey's version,
they were larger than life, fighting Indians and prairie fires and described as “cheerful and patient” but “industrious, indefatigable and indomitable.”

Every February the University identifies a special Founder’s Week to honor the Creightons. Their spirit lives on, and the best summary of our beginnings can be found in the words of our current University President, Michael Morrison, S.J., who wrote the following in recognition of Founder’s Week in 1991:

From their humble beginnings in Ohio, Edward and John emerged as people of courage and vision who had a profound effect on nearly every aspect of economic, political and cultural life in the Great Plains.

When others viewed the land between the Missouri River and California as a wilderness, Edward and John envisioned telegraphs and railroads which would unite the country.

Where others saw a vast wasteland, the Creighton brothers saw cattle ranches, livestock industries and trade routes.

Others saw Omaha as a struggling frontier town. The Creightons determined to make it a thriving city. They helped develop healthy commerce, led efforts to make Omaha a communications and transportation center and encouraged churches, schools and other cultural advantages. In a time when ignorance was commonplace and schooling not always considered a virtue, Edward Creighton dreamed of a University. Mary Lucretia Creighton made it a reality.

Creighton’s founders not only dared to dream, they worked tirelessly to realize those dreams. In doing so, they were guided by a strong faith in God, a commitment to excellence, a compassionate sense of service to humanity and a bright belief in the future.

Today, Creighton pursues its mission, guided by these same tenets. The esprit tradition of excellence in education, which John Creighton insisted upon, is being continued. Our graduates, scattered around the globe, are educated academically and spiritually.

Our students follow the example of Mary Lucretia Creighton in their service to the poor and underprivileged. Their service trips to Louisiana and Appalachia, the ILAC Program in the Dominican Republic and the many people served by our Dental and Medical clinics are but a few examples. Life on the frontier was difficult. We admire the Creightons for their steadfast faith, their work ethic and their resiliency in the face of adversity and personal loss. Life today is no less difficult as we, as individuals and a nation, face increasingly complex, often frightening, choices. Following the example and values of those who have gone before us can often make those choices easier.
References


8. Fell, pp. 5-7; Kirby, pp. 3-8; Mullens, pp. 19-25; Sorenson, pp. 30-31.


10. Fell, pp. 6-7; Arthur Unscheid, Ph.D., (Professor of History, Creighton University), "Edward Creighton (1820-1874)", pp. 3-5 (Courtesy Creighton University Archives.)


12. B. Sorenson, p. 27.

B. Sorenson, pp. 75-79.


14. Sorenson, p. 44.

15. Mullens, p. 111; Mullens, p. 45.


