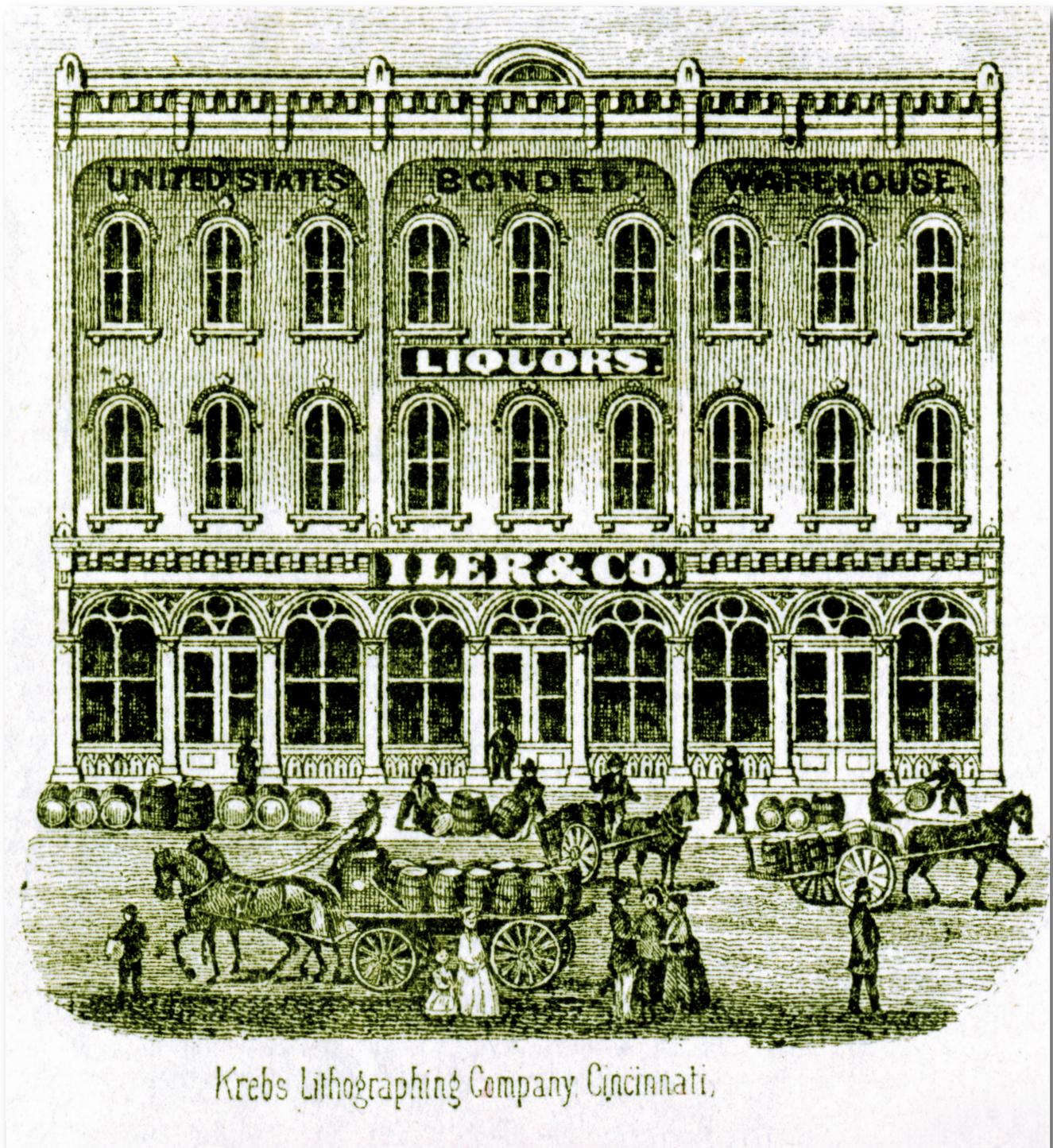


THE MYSTERY OF 233



PHOTOS: GEROME WALTON

*There is no “233” address on Farnham Street in Omaha.
If there was, it would be under the waters
of the Missouri River.*

MY INTEREST IN THE “233” NOTE predates the publication of my book, *A History of Nebraska Banking and Paper Money*, published in 1978, in which I illustrated one of these notes in the chapter titled “Nebraska Miscellaneous.” This note was intriguing from the start and generated many unanswered questions. In actuality, it is an advertising piece made to look like genuine United States paper money. To entice customers to read and remember the product, the company printed its address and a promotional message on the note.

The scrip itself measures approximately 178 x 76mm, which was comparable in size to the paper money of the time. Various design elements were adapted to make it look much like the issues of 1861-64, namely Legal Tender, Demand and Interest Bearing Notes in \$5, \$20, \$500 and \$1,000 denominations.

The 233 note was printed by Ehrgott, Forbriger & Co., a lithographic firm in Cincinnati, Ohio, which was in business under that name from 1860 to late 1869. I had looked at illustrations of similar issues, but was unable to ascertain who had printed them, that is, until I added the 233 note to my collection. The green overprint was a little higher, allowing me to make out the lithograph company’s moniker along the bottom edge. Minor variances in the placement of the overprint (a separate press run), both horizontal and vertical, were normal and not considered errors.

When you first observe the note, you might think that the denomination is \$233, but on closer examination it becomes clear that 233 is the address of Iler & Company on Farnham Street in Omaha. This is confusing, because today there is no 233 address on Farnham. If there was, it would be under the waters of the Missouri River.

Here is the explanation: Omaha City was incorporated by the third territorial legislature on January 5, 1857, and then became the City of Omaha. By July 1854, the streets had already been laid out, numbered and named by Alfred D.



▲ **THIS NOTE ADVERTISING AMERICAN LIFE BITTERS** was distributed by Iler & Company of Omaha, Nebraska. Bitters is an alcoholic solution of aromatic plants used in mixed drinks or patent medicines.

Actual Size: 178 x 76mm

Jones. He was the area’s first white settler, postmaster, judge and surveyor. He mapped out 322 blocks, each of which were 264 feet square; he named the east/west streets and numbered the north/ south streets.

As originally platted, 233 Farnham Street was in Block 137, which was on the south side of Farnham. “Central Block” was between 13th and 14th Streets and was divided into four lots, each 66 feet wide. These could be further divided into 22-foot sub-lots; thus, address 233 was the eastern third of Lot 3. The Central National Bank was 231, next door to Iler. The address, which is the western third of Lot 2, is confirmed by the *Omaha Recorder of Deeds Historical Deed* index book.

This numbering system was further verified by Robert H. Marks, who had researched and written about the early streets of Omaha. Jones’ original system was confusing, unwieldy and did not lend itself to expansion. After 25 years, the Omaha City Council passed an ordinance in 1879

◀ **THE CENTRAL BLOCK** building housed numerous merchants, including Iler & Company located in Lot 3.

Farnham officially became Farnam, dropping the “H” from the name that had been misspelled from its inception in 1854.



PHOTOS: GEROME WALTON & HERITAGE AUCTIONS (RIGHT NOTE)

▲ **THE GREEN OVERPRINT** is a little higher on the left note’s bottom edge, revealing the note’s printer, Ehrgott, Forbriger & Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio. This line is obscured on the specimen at the right.

that changed the addressing scheme to the one used today. Under the new system, what was 233 Farnham officially became 1313 Farnam, dropping the “H” from the name that had been misspelled from its inception in 1854 on a map by E. Robyn, a lithographer from St. Louis, Missouri. (Long before the city council corrected the error, publishers, advertisers and other city offices had noted the discrepancy and used the proper spelling.) The 12 addresses in Central Block became 1301 through 1323.

Farnam Street was named for Henry Farnam, president of the Rock Island Railroad. Along with the Northwestern and Burlington lines, the Rock Island was being constructed across Iowa, possibly to connect with the transcontinental railroad.

Why was “Central Block” so named? There are two clues in the 1870 book *Early and Authentic History of Omaha, 1857-1870* by A.J. Hall:

The time has passed when Nebraska was considered the limit of the West, and the school boy of

► **PETER E. ILER** was born on February 10, 1840, in Wooster, Ohio. He moved to Omaha in 1866 and was well known as a mover and shaker in commercial industry from the 1860s to the 1920s. In 1915 he suffered a stroke and later died on January 25, 1920, at his home at 1248 S. 10th Street. Iler’s gravestone in Prospect Hill Cemetery in Omaha marks two plots. His wife, Mary Ann, is buried in Lot 284, but there is no metal plaque on his side (Lot 285). It is speculated that the stroke may have blindsided him, and he had not left any money or instructions for a plaque.



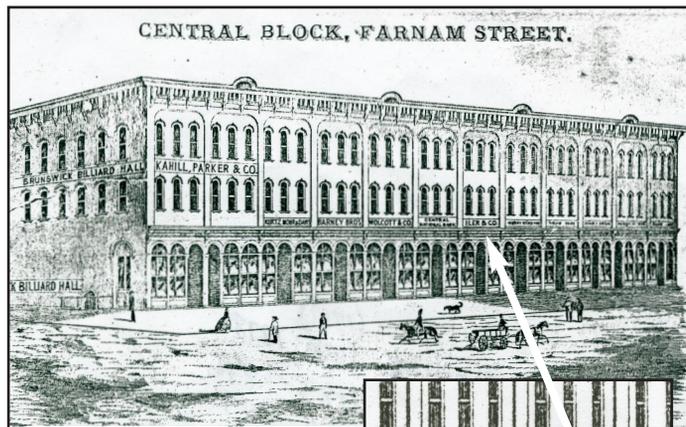
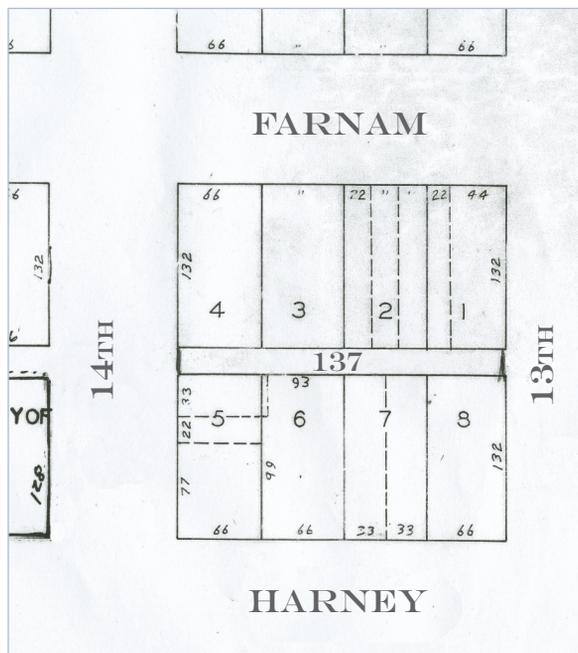
today is taught with wonder to consider the amplitude of a nation of which the “Mighty Missouri” is the dividing center. To the stranger, the traveler or even those, who, within the past few years have made their home in Omaha, “the Central City of the Republic,” how like the magic changes of fairy land are the wonderful transactions which are every day taking place.

“Central” was a common description at the time, such as Central Block, Grand Central Hotel, Central Land Company and Central National Bank, all in Omaha. Indeed, the “Central Block” name came to apply to the structure built upon it.

The exact date of issue of the 233 note can be extrapolated from known events and information. Peter Iler came to Omaha in 1866; Central Block, which housed Iler & Company, was built in late 1867 and early 1868, following a fire in 1867 that destroyed most of the shops along the south side of Farnam, between 13th & 14th Streets. Once the area was cleared for reconstruction, William J. Stephens and William R. Wilcox of Stephens & Wilcox (the most well-known dry goods company in the West), which had been forced out by the fire, contracted with previous and prospective tenants to build a new Central Block building. Iler took one 22-foot storefront, which became 233 Farnam.

The advertising note reads “State of Nebraska,” which entered the Union on March 1, 1867. *D. Collins’ Omaha City Directory* of July 4, 1868, has a frontispiece illustrating “Central Block Farnam Street,” which shows Iler & Com-

▼ **BLOCK 137** was originally laid out by Alfred D. Jones in July 1854. The system was confusing and did not allow for growth. The Omaha City Council changed the addressing scheme to the one used today.



▲ **AN IMAGE OF CENTRAL BLOCK** in an 1868 city directory shows the Iler establishment located at 233 Farnam.



pany occupying the eastern third of Lot 3, Block 137. In late 1869, Ehrgott, Forbriger & Co. changed its name to Ehrgott & Krebs. All these happenings indicate the 233 note was made in 1868 or 1869.

The Recorder of Deeds states that a warranty deed was issued to P.E. Iler, M.W. Kennard and Jos. D. Iler on February 23, 1869, and a deed was issued on April 10 of the same year. The product advertised on the note, “American Life Bitters,” was produced by P.E. Iler in Tiffin, Ohio, and brought to Omaha when he arrived in 1866. (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* describes “bitters” as an alcoholic solution of bitter and often aromatic plant products used in mixed drinks or as a mild tonic. It was thought to help with bowel and stomach problems, as well as dyspepsia.) An entry in *Wolf’s Omaha City Directory* for 1874-75 shows Kennedy’s East India Bitters and American Life Bitters. This was the last time American Life Bitters was mentioned in the directories.

During this time, Omaha was flooded with people, including Union and Confederate soldiers, looking for work and normalcy. So these notes were giveaways that said, in effect, “Come to 233 Farnam Street to get your products from Iler’s Willow Springs Distillery.”

The number of advertising notes produced for Iler & Company is pure speculation, as no paperwork is known to have survived. How many of these notes are extant? The general census of reported specimens stands at six. None of these have serial numbers, so one must rely on creases, stains, borders, overprint placement, tears, splits, chips and other observable differences. The six reported notes come in various grades, three of which have been certified by third-party grading companies. The note shown here is one of the finest.

Iler invoices picturing the storefront were printed by the Krebs Lithography, successor to Ehrgott, Forbriger & Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio,

