

*The following is an excerpt taken from the history section of the City of New Salem Website
(<http://www.newsalem-nd.com/>)*

THE SAGA OF NEW SALEM

On an April day in 1883, a westbound freight train pulled into Jamestown, Dakota Territory and stopped to take on coal and water and to change crews. It so happened that an immigrant car in charge of a young man of 19 summers stopped near a farm implement sales yard. The salesman noticed the young man in the boxcar and stepped over to visit.

“How far west are you going?” he asked.

“They tell me it’s about thirty miles west of the Missouri River”, replied the immigrant.

“Plan to farm out there?” pursued the salesman.

“That’s the idea”, answered the youth.

“In that case you’ll need machinery”, said the man, smelling a chance to make a sale.

“Oh, I can probably get a plow at Mandan. That’s what I need most”, replied the immigrant.

“I’m telling you”, persisted the salesman, “this is the last chance you’ll have to pick up a plow. There’s not much farming being done west of here.”

That information was a bit surprising to the immigrant and he pondered it for several moments.

The salesman perceived a weakening sales resistance and put on more pressure.

“I have some very good breaking plows right here in the yard.”

The result of this conversation was that when the train resumed its way westward, a shiny new breaking plow had been added to the equipment in the immigrant car.

In 1882 a number of Evangelical pastors from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana and Wisconsin made plans to plant colonies on the then raw frontier of the plains states. They organized a Colonization Bureau in Chicago. In the fall of 1882 a committee was sent out to visit several western states. They looked over sites in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and finally, through the efforts of the Northern Pacific Railroad, Dakota Territory. The railroad had just been constructed through this area and the company was anxious to have settlers along the line. The Northern Pacific issued circulars giving information to prospective settlers and offered to transport them to Western Dakota at greatly reduced rates. The railroad company also offered to plot a new city, laying it out in lots, blocks and streets. The Northern Pacific had been granted every other section of land for fifty miles on each side of the right-of-way by the Federal Government and it agreed to donate the lots in the new city and half of the remaining land in Section 21 Township 139 Range 85.

By the end of 1882 some 200 members had signed up. Each group was sponsored by a pastor of their church known as the German Evangelical Synod of North America.

And so it happened that about noon on April 5, 1883 the first immigrant car arrived where Salem was to be located. It was in charge of John Christiansen and contained the household goods, three horses, some lumber and machinery belonging to A.V. Schallern, Peter Schmidt, J.

J. Leuck and John Christiansen all of Ripon, Wisconsin. John was the youngest man of the group and volunteered to ride the car to Dakota Territory.

Thus John Christiansen preceded his fellow pioneers to the “promised land” by about 12 hours.

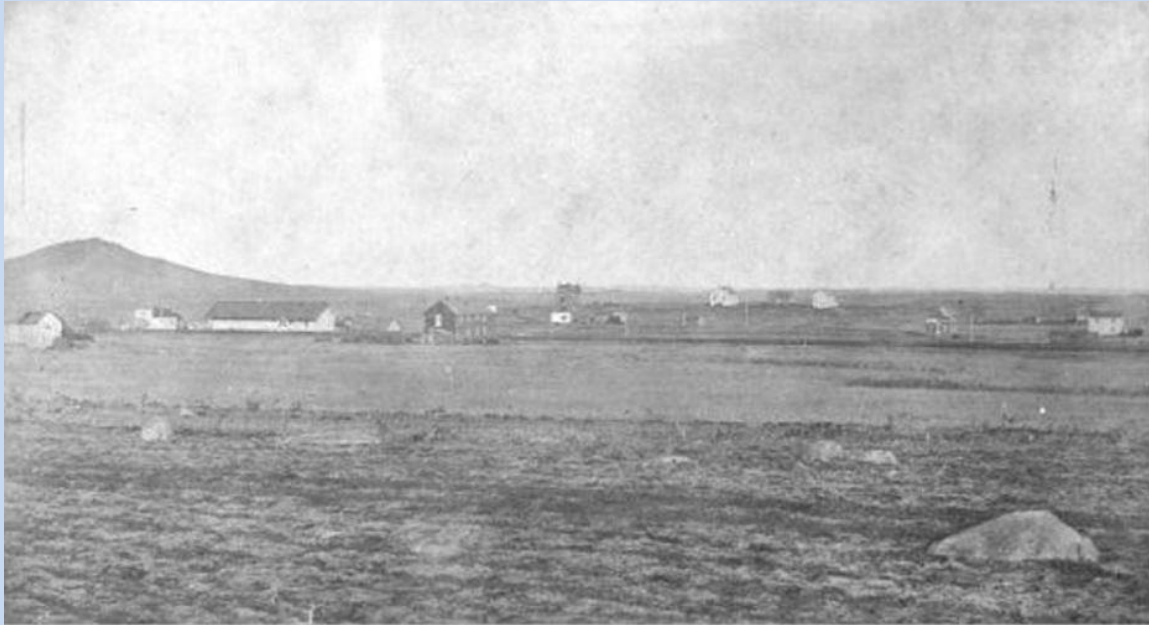
The pioneers lived in boxcars until the railroad company built an immigrant house. Settlers lived there until they had a shack built on their homestead. The water supply came from a railroad tank car and other supplies were brought by rail from Mandan and Bismarck. Some lumber was available to build small homes and neighbors helped each other. Sod houses were constructed as a measure of economy and protection against devastating prairie fires.

The first church service was held out of doors on June 13, 1883. By the end of 1883 almost all the necessary services for plain living were available in the new town.

In June of that year of 1883 an incident took place that has brought New Salem nation-wide recognition. One pleasant June morning Christiansen was out breaking the virgin prairie sod. As his team slowly pulled the breaking plow back and forth and the black strip of plowed ground grew wider, a couple of Sioux Indians approached and watched with interest the activity of the white man. The Sioux were a good deal tamer at this time than they had been a few years earlier, but they were still unpredictable and John’s feelings were not exactly calm. Since there were only two Indians the situation was not as serious as if there had been more. Presently they came nearer and examined the breaking. Possibly this was the first plowing they had seen except the scratching the Mandans did on the river bottoms. Things didn’t look right to them and the older Indian began turning the sod back to its original position. As Christiansen came over to them the younger Indian muttered “Wrong Side Up.”



Photo courtesy of the North Dakota Department of Transportation



State Historical Society of North Dakota

This early photo of New Salem was taken sometime between 1883-1900.

On the back is handwritten "First picture of New Salem."

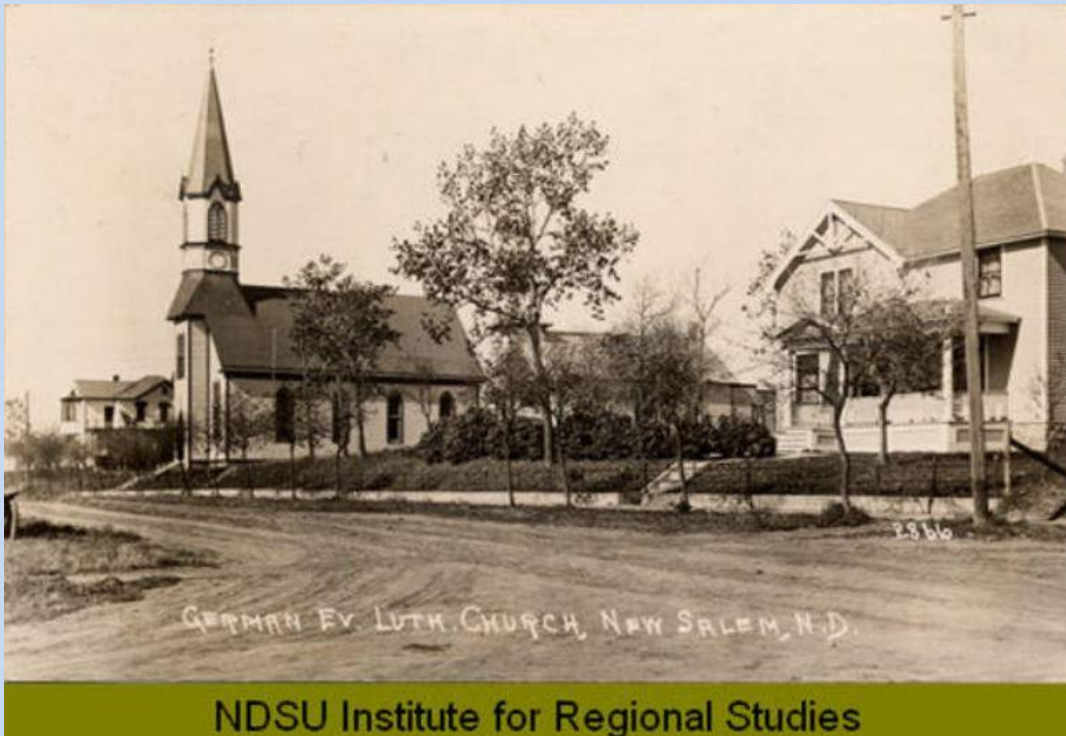
Photo credit: State Historical Society of North Dakota (A2066)



NDSU Institute for Regional Studies

A real photo postcard shows the main thoroughfare of New Salem in 1907 or 1908.

Photo credit: Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo (2000.368.6)



Deutsches Evangelische Friedens Gemeinde, New Salem, 1920s
Photo credit: Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo (2000.368.10)



Waiting for the State Highway Department to open U.S. 10 at New Salem in 1943.
Photo courtesy of the North Dakota Department of Transportation



A parade on the Main Street of New Salem, 1951.
State Historical Society of North Dakota (10557-2-F6-079)



North Dakota landmark Salem Sue was built on top of a butte in New Salem in 1974 by the city's Lions Club to commemorate the region's dairy industry.
State Historical Society of North Dakota (2013-P-024-0123)