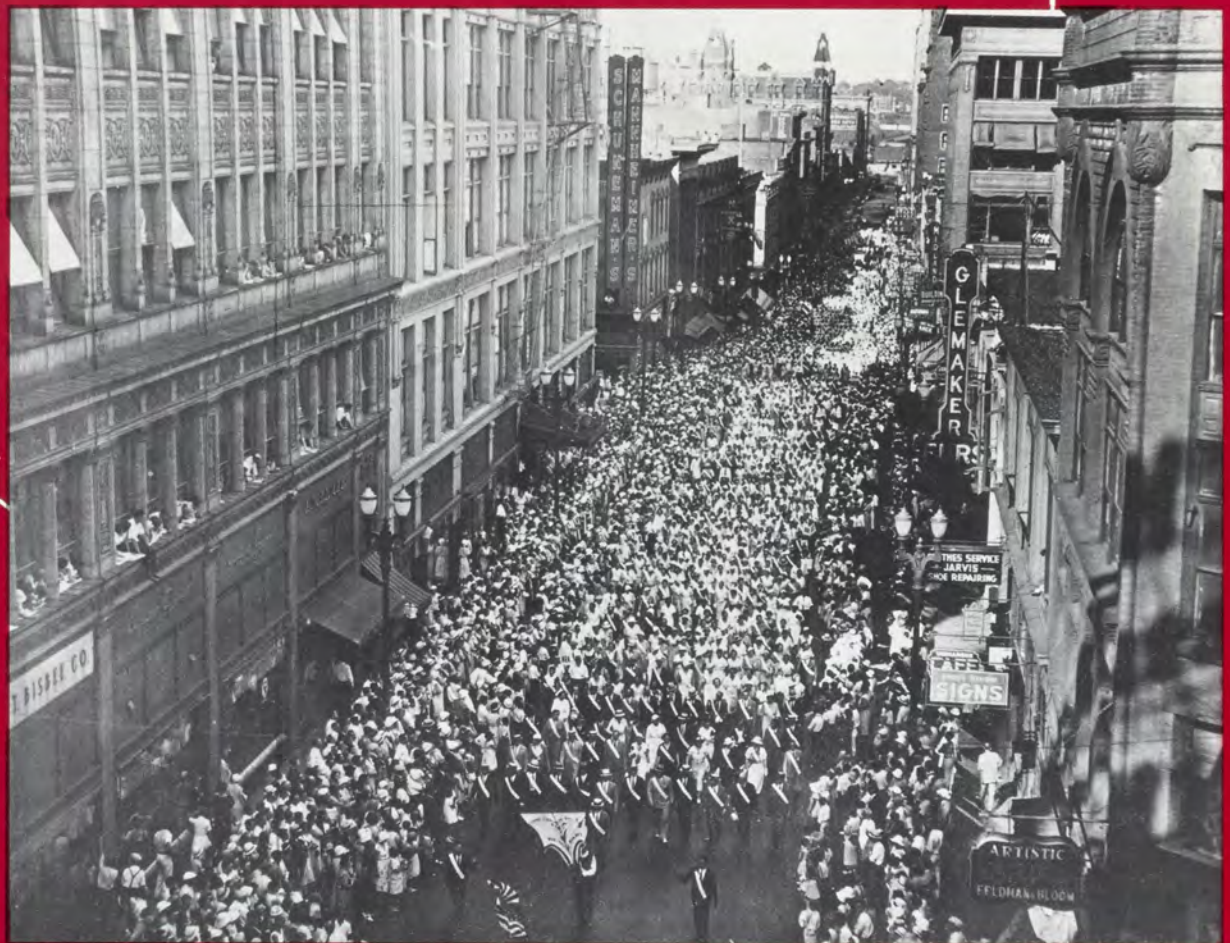


# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Ramsey County Historical Society

A Pioneer Writes Home  
Alexander Wilkin and 1850s  
St. Paul

Volume 24  
Number 2



# Ramsey County History

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## Contents

Volume 24  
Number 2

A Pioneer Writes Home  
Alexander Wilkin and 1850s St. Paul  
By Ronald M. Hubbs — Page 3

Boom, Boom, Bust! The '29 Crash  
By Woodrow Keljik — Page 17

Cold Weather, Warm Hearts — Page 26

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ON THE COVER: An N.R.A. parade, in downtown St. Paul, in August, 1933, demonstrated support for Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to cope with the Depression that settled over the country after the stock market crash of 1929. The small ink drawing is of W. H. Forbes' trading post in downtown St. Paul, as sketched by Robert O. Sweeny, a young druggist and artist, in 1852. It was one of a number of sketches Sweeny made of sites in pioneer St. Paul.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The photograph of Alexander Wilkin on page 8 is from the archives of The St. Paul Companies. All other photographs are from the audiovisual library of the Minnesota Historical Society. The original of the broadside reproduced on page 7 is in the Ignatius Donnelly papers, Division of Library and Archives, Minnesota Historical Society. The original of the Sweeny drawing is in the Minnesota Historical Society's art collection.

## A Pioneer Writes Home

# Alexander Wilkin and 1850s St. Paul

By Ronald M. Hubbs

When Alexander Wilkin came ashore from a Mississippi riverboat at St. Paul in June, 1849, he had forsaken his home town in New York and the gold fields in California for excitement and adventure in the new Territory of Minnesota. It wasn't a flip-of-the-coin decision—he had prepared for this event.

Like many pioneers on America's various frontiers, Wilkins brought with him an entrepreneurial spirit, some army experience, connections through his family to the political establishment in Washington and a law degree. His letters to his family paint a vivid portrait of life in the growing settlement of St. Paul during the 1850s. Not all of the language he uses to describe the region's Native Americans, expeditions into Indian country and relationships among Indian leaders and whites is acceptable today, by any means. Nor are his descriptions of others of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Still, his accounts reflect the thinking and the stereotyping of his time and suggest, also, why much of this has persisted to the present.

Wilkin came from Goshen, New York, the son of a prominent family there. His father, Samuel J. Wilkin, was a state legislator and congressman. His brother, Westcott, often called "Weck" in his letters, became a distinguished St. Paul judge. A physically small man—five feet one inch in height and weighing scarcely more than 100 pounds—Alexander Wilkin hankered after a military career.

When the Mexican War broke out in 1846, he recruited a company of volunteers from around Goshen, then, commissioned a captain in the Tenth United States Infantry, he was sent to Mexico as part of General Zachary Taylor's command. Taylor, who was Fort Snelling's commandant between 1828 and 1829, became president of the United States in 1848.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ronald M. Hubbs is the retired chairman of the board and former president of The St. Paul Companies, the company that, in its previous incarnation as St. Paul Fire and Marine, Alexander Wilkin helped found and served as its first president. This is Hubbs' second article for Ramsey County History.*

With the end of the war, Wilkin decided to cast his lot with other settlers of the newly-created Minnesota territory but before leaving for the frontier, he lined up support for his appointment as secretary of the territory. Letters went out to Taylor's vice president, Millard Fillmore, and to Thomas Ewing, secretary of the Home Department (now the Department of the Interior), endorsing young Wilkin. He was appointed to the position by Fillmore who became president when Taylor died in office.

Approaching 30 in 1849, Wilkin had chosen a community that with its 200 people and some 30 buildings seemed, to pessimists, to offer no real future. As one historian put it, "...presuming people [came] here, what resources were there to furnish them business and employment? The Indian trade, supplying the frontier forts, the lumber business and its supplies, a little fur trade...was about all."

In 1849 news sent East stated that the nearest settlement to St. Paul was Prairie du Chien, that winters were severe and that mail reached St. Paul on dog sled. Minnesota was almost unknown, lying in a latitude deemed to be semi-arctic in its character and inhabited by savages. In the year that Wilkin arrived, so did Minnesota's territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey. But the nay-sayers were wrong. By the 1850s immigrants were arriving by the thousands, mostly by riverboat. Understandably, law enforcement was a primary concern. President Taylor had appointed the Honorable Aaron Goodrich chief justice for Minnesota. When the court met on August 12, 1849, Goodrich reported that, "The role of attorneys is large for a new country. About 20 of the lankiest and hungriest description were in attendance..." And the *St. Paul Chronicle and Register* reported that "The proceedings were for the first two or three days somewhat crude, owing to the assembling of a bar composed of persons from nearly every state.... At this session it was said only one man on the jury wore boots! All the rest had moccasins." As a lawyer, Wilkin did not lose the opportunity to be there.

His first letter home to his sister, Sarah or Sally,

described St. Paul as "a delightful place," and "Such lots of Indians as you would see! All painted up—with...scarlet and blue blankets on their shoulders, moccasins on their feet—wampum belts around their waists—bracelets on their arms—feathers in their hair—great bunches of rings in their ears—and beads around the neck—then the squaws with little papooses on their backs..." Later he reported that he was amused because a party of Winnebagoes had come to town "with bells jingling" to talk with the new governor. They invited Wilkin to visit them, promising him a wife if he did so. He added: "I think I shall start in a day or two and make them a visit. They live about a hundred miles from here."

An early letter from his mother cautioned him to "...moderate your ambition about wealth and fame and you would be happier and in all probability a more virtuous man, for the eager pursuit of these things brings us into circumstances of temptation to evil which no man trusting in his own strength can be sure he will be able to resist. He that trusts in his own heart is a fool."

Early on, Wilkin was urged to try for the post of attorney general. An old friend, Judge William B. Wright, wrote him, praising his "indefatigable perseverance & untiring industry in the discharge of any duty imposed upon you. In the organization of a new territory gov. Ramsey would find your peculiar talents invaluable to him & the territorial government." His brother, Westcott, urged it, too. "The emoluments of the office I suppose, are not very great but then it's something to have the honor & it gives you a name & standing which may be very useful if you conclude to settle down in that part of the world." He naively added, "I suppose there are too few of you out there to have much excitement in the way of politics." Apparently he had not heard of Rice, Sibley, Ramsey and others!

Actually, Wilkin was involved almost immediately in territorial politics. The manipulating and dealing characteristic of that period, entangled with the drive to acquire the "extensive, rich and salubrious region" to the north and west, were apparent in this June, 1850, letter to his father. Wilkin described a council with the Sioux and Chippewa at Fort Snelling:

"The Chippewas and Sioux are holding a Council for the purpose of making peace. There are assembled one hundred of the Chippewa Braves and four or five hundred Sioux. The excitement is very great as there is fear that collisions may take place. The Council is held under the walls of the Fort, where the guns are loaded and the matches burning. I never witnessed a more exciting scene. In fact, the excite-

ment made me downright sick. Every white man takes sides with one or the other. For my part I am a Chippewa and 'Hole-in-the-Day' their head chief my particular friend. There was an undercurrent going on at the Council which strangers could not understand. The Fur Co.\* is endeavoring to make capital out of the treaty and some of us, (myself in particular) were engaged in intriguing against them. There is a large Chippewa half-breed vote, embracing the entire vote of Pembina on the British Lines, which it is important for either party to obtain. The head chief is a Whig\*\* and deadly opposed to the Fur Company & Sibley, but they are endeavoring to buy him over, detach him from his former friends and then degrade him to make way for a brother-in-law of one of the company, a half-breed also. I found out the maneuver and put the Chief upon his guard. He was inclined to give up to them because he thought he had not the power to oppose them. I have promised him the Deputy Marshallship to take the Census for Pembina and to get our friends to support him for the Legislature in his district, if he will support Mitchell\*\*\* for Congress."

Samuel Wilkin was busy, too, attempting to find a suitable vacancy for his son. He wrote that he had contacted several friends and political associates "relative to you, requesting their aid should any vacancies occur in Minnesota. I mentioned the Judgeship particularly—you had better get some of your friends there to write in your behalf..." He also gave his son some fatherly advice: "...try and get in business. If you can only make your expenses, living on a moderate scale, it will be doing well. Person in a new country must be economical, spending no more than is necessary to make them comfortable. It is no place for extravagance and pride. Your hope must be in the future..."

For Alexander, politics were scarcely the only source of excitement in territorial Minnesota. In July he joined some 50 volunteers from St. Paul and a company of regulars on an expedition to quiet "misbehaving Winnebagoes" near Sauk Rapids. In letters home he described the country as "the wildest and roughest on earth, the mosquitoes abundant and scarce a habitation on the route." He had, he said, "but one change of clothing...and those unsuitable.

\*The American Fur Company at Mendota, The company's regional "lord" was Henry Hastings Sibley who became Minnesota's first governor in 1858.

\*\*A major American political party that in the mid-1850s became the Republican party.

\*\*\*Colonel Alexander M. Mitchell, marshal of the territory.



I have arranged to borrow a blanket from the interpreter."

### March to the North

Later that month, Wilkin was in charge of a 15-day expedition by a detachment from Fort Snelling "sent by order of Alexander Ramsey, Governor of Minnesota Territory and Superintendent of Indian Affairs, in pursuit of certain Chippewa Indians on the St. Croix [river], Wisconsin, charged with the murder of Alexander H. Livingston, a white man...." Wilkin billed Ramsey for \$4 per day. It was on this march into the area around Taylor's Falls, a region settled a decade earlier as part of the Territory of Wisconsin, that a bit of civilization appeared in the midst of the wilderness.

*Sioux treaty chiefs from Minnesota during a visit to Washington, D. C., in 1858. Photo by Fredericks, Washington, D. C.*

"I am now stopping," Wilkin wrote, "with a Judge Perkins an eastern man, who has one of the most delightful places I ever saw. This house is a large and beautiful English cottage situated near the bank of the river and opposite the Falls, in the most picturesque spot I ever saw. The house is elegantly furnished as much so as Mrs. Wickhams, and there are two very agreeable young ladies visiting at the house. There is always a fine breeze from the river and an abundance of excellent water from springs which send forth large streams to the river and emptying over the rocks forming the most beautiful cascades.

Near the house is a large poultry yard filled with domestic and wild fowl and the out houses are built in cottage style. They have also a beautiful young fawn running about the grounds...I hope to have some sport in trout fishing and deer hunting while gone as both are said to be abundant. Berries of various kinds are very plentiful and can be picked by the bushel."

Wilkin's long letter to his cousin, Caleb, is a vivid account of the hardships endured on an expedition "which was perfectly horrible," he said later.

"...I left Taylor's Falls on July 10 at 1 p.m. with my men, the Sheriff, an Interpreter, a Jew, who had seen all parts of the world and spoke all modern languages and who had married a Chippewa Squaw, and an old withered Frenchman over sixty years of age, who had hired me his horses to pack my camp equipage and provisions upon—the country being utterly impassable to wagons.... The road lay through a perfect wilderness, muddy and intersected with streams. We pursued our way with great difficulty and arrived in the evening at Wolf Creek, the scene of the murder, distant fifteen miles from the Falls, where we cooked some of our provisions and retired—not to sleep—for the mosquitoes constantly whispered in our ears that such a thing was impossible and not expected of strangers at Wolf Creek.

"In the morning we found it raining cats and dogs but the sheriff, Interpreter, and myself concluded to go on for two miles to a shanty and remain until the storm should subside and the men be able to march, which they did about noon and came up soon after accompanied by the Indian guide whom I had pressed into the service before leaving....

"...As I lay I could not help thinking of the days of Robin Hood and the Green Woods which he frequented. Our fires were lighted and an old dead tree had taken fire and gave out a lurid light. All we wanted to complete the picture was the pretty village maidens whom it was said the brave Robin used to assemble on gala days; but then we had what was equally romantic, a Maiden of the forest....

"The woman took the lead and led us on through the bushes and marshes and over streams occasionally halting until the trail could be found and then plunge on as if we were walking on the finest pavement. I never could before appreciate the Indian's sagacity but was fully convinced. I should never had been able to find my way anywhere had I been left to myself. Her expertness won applauses from all and her husband seemed to be really proud of his wife....

"After traveling some miles we came to a river, the water in which was nearly to the men's necks. One

or two with the guide waded across taking with them an axe, and cut away a trail through the bushes on the other side after which we all plunged in and succeeded in reaching the opposite shore, thoroughly drenched—and continued our march which lay through swamps and forests, where the sun scarcely penetrated, and were swimming with water, the season being more wet than had been known for thirty years.... After four o'clock we reached Wood Lake, took our baggage across on logs over the outlet and swam our horses to the other side....

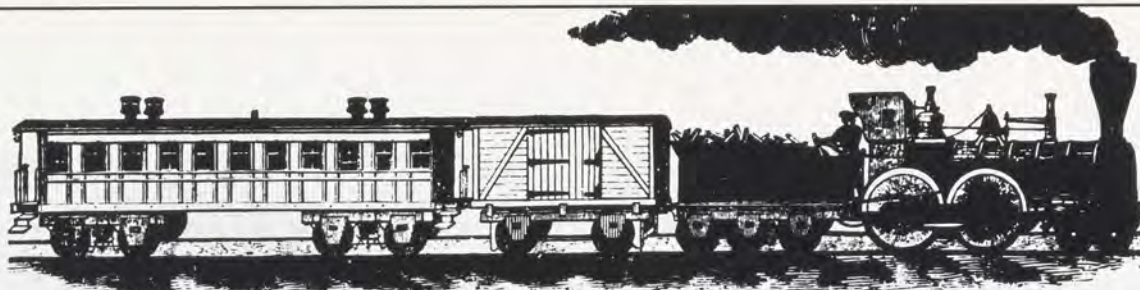
"The Indians had deserted their lodges, having undoubtedly learned our approach. The sheriff and interpreter feared that they were gathering together at some point and intended to give us a fight but I knew better. While at the lake we found black caps and raspberries in abundance and had a fine dessert.... In the morning we moved on, the road being worse (if possible) than before and our horses frequently getting down in the marshes and quicksands, and having to be got out with great difficulty, one at the expense of a good deal of beating after removing the loads from their backs. Moreover a violent storm took place accompanied with the most fearful thunder and lightning I ever saw or heard....

"We learned that Baptiste, an Indian who had killed a white two years before and had escaped after being taken, was at the lake and I ordered the party to turn back with me which they were reluctant to do; but I told them if they did not start I would tie them and have them carried back, so they turned with us.... The Interpreter did not like the trip much as Baptiste was a desperate fellow and had threatened to take his life when he met him.... We started however, armed with pistols, and the soldier with his musket, but we had not gone far before a most fearful storm came on and we were drenched. The lake was a mile across and the water rough, but we succeeded in getting across and pulling the canoes into the bushes proceeded to wade through the marsh to the lodges.

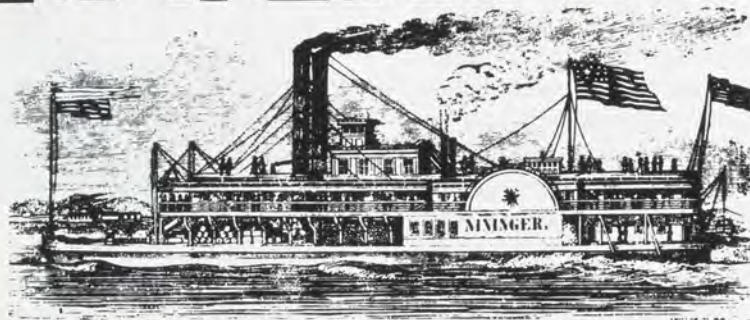
"An Indian boy went with us and when near placed his hand upon his lips and pointed to the first lodge, which I entered. Several women and children were inside and a stout Indian lying on his back with a blanket over him concealing his face.... the Interpreter who had followed raised the blanket, and said he was not Baptiste. Upon inquiry they said that he

(continued on page 8)

*Broadside promoting emigration up the Mississippi River. This was one of many methods used to attract settlers after Minnesota became a territory in 1849 and real estate began to boom.*



# EMIGRATION



## UP THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

The attention of Emigrants and the Public generally, is called to the now rapidly improving  
**TERRITORY OF MINNESOTA,**  
 Containing a population of 150,000, and goes into the Union as a State during the present year. According to an act of Congress passed last February, the State is munificently endowed with Lands for Public Schools and State Universities, also granting five per cent. on all sales of U. S. Lands for Internal Improvements. On the 3d March, 1857, grants of Land from Congress was made to the leading Trunk Railroads in Minnesota, so that in a short time the trip from New Orleans to any part of the State will be made in from two and a half to three days. The

### **CITY OF NININGER,**

Situated on the Mississippi River, 35 miles below St. Paul, is now a prominent point for a large Commercial Town, being backed by an extensive Agricultural, Grazing and Farming Country; has fine streams in the interior, well adapted for Milling in all its branches: and Manufacturing **WATER POWER** to any extent.

Mr. JOHN NININGER, (a Gentleman of large means, ideas and liberality, speaking the various languages,) is the principal Proprietor of **Nininger**. He laid it out on such principles as to encourage all **MECHANICS**, Merchants, or Professions of all kinds, on the same equality and footing; the consequence is, the place has gone ahead with such rapidity that it is now an established City, and will annually double in population for years to come.

Persons arriving by Ship or otherwise, can be transferred without expense to Steamers going to Saint Louis; or stop at Cairo, and take Railroad to Dunleith (on the Mississippi). Steamboats leave Saint Louis and Dunleith daily for **NININGER**, and make the trip from Dunleith in 36 to 48 hours.

### **NOTICES.**

1. All Railroads and Steamboats giving this card a conspicuous place, or *gratuitous insertion* in their cards, **AIDS THE EMIGRANT** and forwards their own interest.

2. For authentic documents, reliable information, and all particulars in regard to Occupations, Wages, Preempting Lands (in neighborhood, Lumber, Price of Lots, Expenses, &c., apply to

**THOMAS B. WINSTON**, 27 Camp street, New Orleans.

**ROBERT CAMPBELL**, St. Louis.

**JOSEPH B. FORBES**, Dunleith.

had gone off during the night, first beating his wife severely for endeavoring to persuade him to deliver himself up.... We remained about the lodges in the cold (the rain having extinguished their fires) and after the storm had partially subsided, returned.

"We had heard from our prisoners that 'Shaga,' the man who had shot Livingston at Wolf Creek, was between Yellow Lake and Na-magakan distant about twenty miles but that the trail was impassable to horses—and as we were out of provisions except a little coffee and a quart or two of beans, we concluded though contrary to my inclinations, to return, and after talking pretty severely with the natives and releasing them, started back—and such a road—The route for a considerable distance lay through a marsh, swollen greatly by the recent storm, and the water up to our waists....

"...I became discouraged and thought we never should get through, but finally reached a little lake distant three miles from our starting place. We set fire to some old pine logs, and made a little weak coffee, and laid down on the ground in our wet clothes without anything to eat....

"Early next morning we pushed on and about noon reached Wood Lake, where we remained two or three hours and caught a small mess of fish. After making a meal we proceeded on our way, but a violent storm came on. After going ten or twelve miles we encamped in a Mosquito Nest. They were more plenty than we had seen them, and could not sleep, worn out as we were.

"The next morning, after partaking of a little bean soup boiled over night, we started again. Soon we came to a river which was very deep and over our heads. We swam the horses over, and went to work cutting down some small trees which we tied together and putting our baggage on, a little at a time, towed it across, after which the men waded out as far as they could get and mounted the raft one or two at a time, when it would sink beneath their feet and the water come up to their chins. We came near drowning two of the soldiers, and were over three hours in getting across. The day before we had to swim another stream also...

"...We reached Stillwater where I learned that during my absence a convention had been called to nominate a delegate to Congress...and that my services were required. I started at 4 the next morning with some of the Delegates, and reached here in time to have a hand in, made a speech, was offered the Presidency of the Convention which I declined, had my friend Col. Mitchell nominated, prepared the resolutions, wrote him a letter (as Chairman of the



Alexander Wilkin

Committee) notifying him of his nomination, and then very good naturedly answered it for him at length.... We shall have a very exciting campaign and my hands are full. I shall have to make speeches, edit a paper, etc."

His military adventures were by no means all that claimed Wilkin's energies. In addition to serving as secretary of the territory, he was at one time or other a federal marshal, newspaper publisher, land developer and real estate agent—at one time he reportedly owned half of downtown St. Paul—and a businessman involved in a number of ventures. He also maintained his abiding interest in and involvement with politics which was virtually essential to survival in the rough-and-tumble world of a frontier community caught up in the process of rapid settlement. Wilkin, along with the rest of his family, was a Whig. When word arrived in October of 1851 of Wilkin's confirmation as secretary of the territory, congratulations were many. *The Minnesotian* editorialized:

"No man in Minnesota is more of a general favorite with her people than the gentleman upon whom the President has conferred the second office in the Territory. He has the ability, the industry, the honesty and the address to make a first rate officer....Another thing which pleases the Minnesotans, is that the President has respected their home claims and appointed one of us to this responsible office..." And, expressing a complaint that will be familiar to today's readers, the newspaper added: "If there be anything we are really sick of, it is official importations. We hope and believe that branch of



trade is ended in Minnesota."

An invitation signed by 33 leading citizens "respectfully invited" Wilkin, "in connection with our worthy Governor [Ramsey], to meet us, and others of your friends at the 'festive board' on any evening that may suit your own and his excellency's convenience." The *Minnesota Pioneer* reported that 100 Whigs and Democrats attended the party at the American House but they had some reservations about the affair:

"The following were regular toasts, after dinner, all of which were drunk, with remarkable enthusiasm, considering the quality of the wine." After some gracious sentiments, Wilkin offered an especially effective toast of his own: "Minnesota, our adopted home—we are the guardians of her infancy, and responsible for her maturity. May we not fail in giving to her destinies a right direction."

Even the *Minnesota Democrat* extended its congratulations: "Mr. Wilkin will, no doubt, make a good Secretary. He is a very zealous people's Whig, and will, as a matter of course, do all in his power to build up Whiggery in Minnesota."

Wilkin's letters home, as well as accounts in the St. Paul newspapers, touched upon many other events that concerned him and reflected his widely varied activities. Not the least of these were the parties that brightened life in the growing town. And his letters reveal a rather endearing personal quality. Alexander Wilkin was something of a ladies man and a flirt.

'...Off goes my head...'

The new secretary wrote to his brother: "Before long I shall have a handsome lounge with sleeping accommodations so that when detained late during the cold nights I can turn in instead of taking a long walk to my boarding house...My own salary is \$1800 and perquisites and extra allowances, say \$1000 more. The office is by far the most pleasant in the Territory and better pay. During the absence, or in case of the resignation or death of the Governor, I assume his duties, and am Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Add to all these considerations that the office was unsought for by me, and voluntarily tendered by his Excellency, the President..."

Still, he seemed to find the ground under his feet a bit shaky. "I fear our party will be routed next fall," he concluded. "If so, off goes my head soon after the fourth of March 1853. If we can, in the meantime, so manage as to gain the preponderance of power in this Territory, I shall be satisfied."

Wilkin had taken on a new partner—Isaac Van

Etten, also from Goshen. Van Etten, a protege of Samuel G. Wilkin, had just passed the bar and later became a prominent Minnesota lawyer. In primping their new office and preparing for Christmas the partners purchased from Franklin Steele a table cover, 6 yards of Morcene, one pair of curtains, 5 yards of scarlet cloth, one Chinese Vermillion, one dozen scalping knives and eight bottles of champagne. What happened next has not been recorded.

He described for his sister a party he had given sometime during the winter that "was said to be a very pleasant affair. Although there were two other parties in town, I had the rooms crowded. The company was scattered through four or five rooms. Several card parties were formed and some danced. I had two musicians constantly playing...."

"About half past ten we had supper, oysters, venison, chickens, turkey, pies, cake of all kinds, nuts, apples, candies, etc., were abundant. The drinkables consisted of coffee, champagne, whiskey, punch and brandy. No one, however, as I observed indulged very freely. The party broke up about one o'clock, and all professed themselves delighted. It was generally conceded to be the handsomest and most pleasant party ever given in St. Paul. Some of the guests arrived late, after going to one of the other parties. I cannot write you about all the flirtations, or all the pretty women. My friend Bessie C. was there, and looked charming. She is a great flirt but the Goshen girls know it is hard to get ahead of your brother in that respect. I suppose the party cost me about fifty dollars, perhaps more." He added: "We have beautiful sleighing upon the river for hundreds of miles...."

The *Minnesota Pioneer* noted: "SECRETARY WILKIN - On Thursday evening of last week, this popular officer gave an entertainment at the Central House, chiefly to members and officers of the Legislature. Gov. Ramsey was present; and the evening was passed very pleasantly. The supper was good, so was the wine. Everything was merry as a marriage ball..."

And again to his sister he wrote: "Day before yesterday I attended a wedding and a large supper party. Last evening, an evening party; and a very elegant gentlemen's supper party. Tonight I am invited to a musical soiree—tomorrow night to a German ball, and on Monday to an Odd Fellows ball; which will be the grandest affair ever known here. It is expected that 100 couples will attend. It is to be got up in New York style, with a programme of the dances and printed cards for the ladies to mark their engagements upon."

Writing home again, he expressed a wistful thought: "I wish Weck could come out here as Secretary to the Indian Commissioners.... The place is a pleasant one and very profitable. I have suggested the subject to Mitchell. Suppose you learn what the chance is. If Judge Goodrich is removed, my chance will be good, I think, for the place. If appointed, however, I could hardly expect Weck would receive one also but my matter is one of great uncertainty. Doctor Norton says I was too small in size to accomplish anything at Washington, and that a larger and good looking man could follow me about and defeat any effect I might have produced and that the appointments made, were the results of accident."\*

The St. Paul newspapers did not seem to be inhibited in reporting the news or their reaction to it.

\*Apparently a reference to Wilkin lobbying for his own appointment in Washington.

Nor did persons quoted appear to exercise much restraint. Witness this account in the January 21, 1851, issue of the *Chronicle and Register*, and Wilkin's involvement in it:

"We have not seen in this place a larger or more respectable meeting of its citizens, that was convened on Wednesday evening at Mazurka Hall, to express their indignation at the brutal and libelous attack made in the last issue of the *Pioneer* upon the Hon. David Cooper and Col. A. M. Mitchell....In reply to numerous calls the Chairman, Capt. Wilkin, arose and said... 'An indictment at a future date might be found against the editor of the *Pioneer* and a jury empaneled to traverse the indictment, which jury would be taken from among you, and who without doubt would convict him of the offence. But

*Red River ox carts on Third Street in downtown St. Paul in 1859. This would have been a familiar sight for Wilkin. Cheritree and Farwell was a hardware store.*



what would be the result? He would be brought up for sentence before the Hon. A. Goodrich, Chief Justice of the Territory, and presiding Judge of the Courts of Ramsey County, who is more than suspected of being the instigator of the libel. He with mock solemnity announces to him his conviction, and proceeds to decree that in consideration of his guilt he shall pay the sum of twenty dollars into the Territorial Treasury. This would, no doubt, be the result, and where would be the atonement due to injured laws and outraged community?

"At the conclusion of Captain Wilkin's remarks, which were received with great applause, the meeting adjourned in peace and order, giving expression to the object for which it was convened in a most emphatic and commendable manner."

Wilkins did have time to be philosophical, as he wrote Weck: "The funeral service of my friend closed but an hour since and I feel gloomy. I feel daily the vanity of life and human affairs and they have but little pleasure for me of late years. There must be something hereafter worthy of our care and attention but the difficulty is to know what to believe and who are right when the world is so divided in opinion. Still it is better that everyone should have some faith and act upon it. This is a wicked country and I feel at times that it is necessary for me to be on my guard. If I do not get better I must get worse."

## Booming Speculation

At this time in his life Wilkin was an avid real estate developer, his transactions constant, intensive and extensive. Real estate was booming as land speculation spread through the community in the first of Minnesota's great real estate booms. Land selling at \$1.25 a acre sold a year later for \$5 an acre. Wilkin frequently had as partners his father, brother, relatives and friends in Goshen and political leaders and entrepreneurs in St. Paul, including Governor Ramsey. His letters on the subject were many. Interest rates and property prices at that time were incredible, as will be observed from the sample transactions mentioned here from time to time to demonstrate the economic realities of the period. Moreover, Wilkin was successful at it. In one letter to his father, he explained his reasons for success:

"A good many were anxious to buy and pay considerably more than I did, but Forbes\* is a particular man and wanted me in. I can sell out tonight for a large advance and receive all cash. I have the reputation of having means, meeting my engagements punctually and possessing business talent, and en-

ergy, which gives me great advantage, as persons will sell a portion of their interest cheap to me in order to get me interested. You know when a man has made a large operation cheap he is inclined to part with a portion low. I feel so myself. My lots cost me a fraction over \$8 each and the lowest price for any is \$25.

"Aunt Jane's house will be completed within a fortnight and a number of good tenants want to go in. I shall rent for \$200 at least. The whole house and lot will cost \$475."

He told his mother: "I am pretty busily engaged, of late, in real estate operations, which keep me considerably occupied and makes me more contented than I would otherwise be. I hope during the course of the present year to realize considerable money by my dealings, and lay the foundation of more....I am more contented here than I could be in Goshen as there is more of excitement and interest to occupy the mind, but the place is an immoral and wicked one, as most new towns are—Still there are some very pleasant and good people."

Matters did not always go smoothly. Wilkin acquired lots in St. Paul, then sold part of them but was having trouble collecting. The buyer, he wrote, "had parted with his interest to Governor Ramsey's brother." Still, he said, some of his lots were now 300 percent over the cost and he added that, "A man cannot go amiss in purchasing property here, and frequently opportunities occur of buying at much less than the market value." He expected to go East the following spring "to make arrangements with capitalists."

Later he wrote his father that he could help a Mr. Ames find a farm he believed available "...a very good one containing 120 acres on the [Taylor's] Falls Road, 40 acres fenced in and in crop...for about \$750." As the year moved on, money became expensive and in great demand. Wilkin told his father, "Money's letting now at five percent a month, well secured by real estate and I could now use a good deal at that rate."

On another matter, in an event that cast its shadow before it, Wilkin asked his father, "Could you please drop a line to Dick Thomas and request him to give me the agency of his Insurance Company? It will be worth to me some hundreds of dollars." Wilkin was representing eastern insurance companies—three of them still thriving and internationally known. This experience undoubtedly convinced him that a

\*W. H. Forbes, who operated a trading post at Fifth and Robert Streets in downtown St. Paul.

local fire and marine insurance company would be successful. In 1853 he became one of the originators and the first president of the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company.

Indians again appear in his letters:

"The town has been somewhat excited lately in consequence of Indian difficulties. A war party of 150 Sioux went up the county sometime since to attack the Chippewas. A few days since they shot one white man and fired upon a number of others. The Dragoons have gone in pursuit."

In July of 1851, the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux was signed and it would remain a matter of controversy. Wilkin concluded a letter to Albram Fridley, the new Winnebago Agent, with this prophetic statement, "You, no doubt, are much worried by persons interested in the Indian Trade—you will find conflicting accounts relating to everything, by those whose interests are desires. You will rest for a while upon a 'bed of thorns'." However, by the following February the Sioux treaties\* had not yet been ratified by the Senate. Henry Sibley sent a sizzling letter to Governor Ramsey complaining that Wilkin had been writing President Fillmore, criticizing the treaties and the Indian Department.

On April 24, 1852, Wilkin himself—now in Washington—wrote an amiable letter to the Governor reporting on the progress of the treaties. Again on May 6, he reported that the treaties would be passed, and the *Minnesota Democrat* of the same date stated that, "Captain Wilkin's earnest zeal in behalf of the treaties entitles him to the warmest thanks of our people."

Historian Theodore C. Blegen, in his *Minnesota - A History of the State*, summed up the situation: "For the whites, the stakes were enormous—close to twenty-four million acres of land which meant expansion, a burgeoning population, frontier dreams come true. For the Sioux tribes, the treaties meant abandonment of hereditary lands, bowing to white powers, reservations along the Minnesota River, temporary gifts, a trust fund, and cash payments which in large part would be diverted to satisfy debts to the traders.

"All this seemed plain enough but the traders maneuvered the chiefs into approving another document (the 'traders paper') in which the Sioux pledged payments of debts to the traders (and allocations to half breeds)...The story is tangled, but no modern reader of the contemporary records can escape the impression that there was an admixture of knavery and deception."

The Sioux treaties were still under congressional

consideration and the delay was putting local citizens on edge. It was decided to send more help to lobby Congress and Wilkin became a leading player in the drawn-out tortuous negotiations. As noted by the *Minnesotian*: "Secretary Wilkin and co. Breck were chosen; and whatever they may urge in favor the measure can be relied on as the sentiments of Minnesota as well as those arguments they may present in regard to the disastrous consequence which will result to our people and the government in case of its failure..." Within three weeks Wilkin was able to write Governor Ramsey that action would be delayed further but "everything looked favorable." In the meantime, his weeks in Washington were not without some harmless mischief. Wilkin wrote his mother that, "The ladies in the house got the idea that I was the Mormon delegate and one of them, a married lady, enquired of a friend of mine, if it was true that I had thirteen wives. I afterward told her I wished she would not undeceive the others as I desired to see how they would treat a man under such circumstances."

Finally, the *Minnesotian* was able to report on May 29, 1852: "We were heartily glad to welcome home, by the 'Nominee' on Thursday, our popular Secretary of the Territory, Capt. Wilkin, after an absence of nearly two months, where he has been laboring with all his might, night and day, to secure the ratification of our treaties. The Captain has fulfilled the mission entrusted to his charge with fidelity and ability, and has his reward (all he asks) in the unanimous and heartfelt thanks of his fellow citizens. He feels certain the ratification is a sure thing, but when it will take place he cannot possibly tell."

On June 26, 1852, the Senate ratified the Sioux treaties. As J. Fletcher Williams described it in his history of St. Paul, "...the news was received in St. Paul amid great rejoicing. The newspapers issued extras, and the evening bonfires blazed on the bluffs...Settlers had not waited for formal ratification of the treaty before taking possession of 'Suland' as it was slangishly termed. Good points for farms, mills and towns—sites had already been seized on, which have since become leading cities of our state."

In early fall of 1852, Alexander Wilkin attained the highest position of his career as suggested in the *Minnesotian*: "We regret to learn the Acting Governor Wilkin has been much indisposed for the past week. He is passing a few days with his friends at Fort

\*There were two treaties: one at Traverse des Sioux with the Sisseton and Wahpeton (the upper Sioux) and the other at Mendota with the Wahpekute and Mdewakanton (the lower Sioux).

Snelling." On October 5, 1852, he wrote to his father on several subjects:

'Times haven't been hard...'

"The Governor has just arrived with \$600,000 of Sioux monies which are to be paid out and will make times lively. I intended to sell all the property I can at fair prices during the winter. I will send you or Mother power of atty and draw on you for the money, after giving you time to get a note discounted. The money will come about the fifth of January. I let out \$250 the other day for Aunt Caroline for six months at 3 per cent a month secured by town property worth near \$3,000 and to me who will pay up punctually. It draws 3 per cent *until paid*. I could have let out more but wait to hear that the money has been deposited. I ought to make a good thing out of the last six months operations though they have cramped me some. Property will without doubt advance rapidly in the Spring and I think will improve this Winter. Times haven't been hard since last Spring....Next Spring the emigration will be very large and we shall have a great many visitors from the South spending the summer. Several fine hotels are in progress of creation.

"I do hope that General Scott\* may be elected. I don't want such a mean set of Democrats as we have here to triumph over us. Ramsey will retire from office in the Spring, and my chance for his place would be fair—certainly if the appointment is made from the Territory, as it should be, if expedience politically is at all considered."

The Sioux settlement had introduced substantial funds into the community; interest rates were declining, but prices were also increasing (bacon cost \$28 per pound). At the end of 1852 Wilkin took inventory and considered himself \$15,000 "clear of the world." He explained to his father that he could earn 25 percent on his money. In his professional ads in the newspapers he added the footnote: "Money to loan in sum to suit the borrowers."

He was still heavily engaged in owning and selling real estate. Out in front of him was the desire to make more money, as he wrote home:

"The largest fortunes in all cities have been made by rise in real estate, and now I have no doubt it will be the same way. When it is bringing say 25 per cent income and is rising constantly, it seems foolishness to sell. Still, when I can get anything like market value, I will sell." Politics now entered the picture as

\*General Winfield Scott, the Whig candidate in the 1852 presidential campaign.



W. H. Forbes' trading post at Third and Robert Streets in 1852, as sketched by Robert O. Sweeney, pioneer druggist and artist. Forbes was an associate of Wilkin's in his real estate dealings.

he continued, "Should I run and be elected to Congress that would give me a position which would enable me to obtain all the means I desire and I could make a fortune, I have no doubt, in a short time. I am economizing now and my personal expenses are comparatively light so that I can save a considerable portion of my income after paying my interest money."

After much newspaper attention Wilkin announced his candidacy for delegate to Congress on the Whig ticket against Democrat Henry M. Rice. Wilkin traveled near and far over the territory, writing his mother of one experience:

"We took our blankets and laid upon the ground. The next morning we broke our wagon, repaired damage, got upset, in the afternoon broke down again, mounted our horses (we had found two strays) put on blankets for saddles and started for Long's 6 miles, which we reached in time for an excellent supper. The house was comfortable having big rooms and down beds. Of course we had to undress before the girls, but they did not seem to mind that."

However, the Whig candidate's political future was forecast by the *Minnesota Pioneer*: "As a man, we think a good deal of Captain Wilkin. As a politician, he has been a very obliging and attentive public officer under a Whig administration. As a candidate to Congress, we really feel a deep regret that he should have placed himself in a position where he must receive the severest castigation that any man could well endure." It goes without saying that Wilkin lost.

As might be expected, Wilkin was caught up in other great concerns of his time. Few generated greater interest in the early 1850s than transportation, especially for a community dependent upon a river ice-locked during almost half of each year. As

Theodore Blegen described it in his *Minnesota - A History of the State*, "Faster and better means of getting from place to place were vital to growth, opening farms, building towns, developing industry and markets, providing effective mail service and indeed knitting the fabric of society and government."

The St. Louis and Dubuque, a new steamboat line, was organized to run boats daily because "the present business and the territory could not otherwise be accommodated." Wilkin signed the minutes as president of the group of organizers whose mission was to use their influence to establish the new line and invest in it.

Another cherished pioneer dream was for railroads, as Blegen points out: "Hopes received a dramatic impetus when the railroad reached Rock Island on February 22, 1854—a momentous event, for it united the Atlantic Coast and the Mississippi by rail." In St. Paul, plans for railroads were everywhere. A roster of St. Paul's best known citizens, including Wilkin, had persuaded the 1853 legislature to incorporate the Lake Superior, Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad Company and to "ascertain the most advantageous route for a railroad from the head of Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean...and to construct a railroad...upon such route as they shall find more eligible for that purpose."

In May of the same year the Louisiana and Western Railroad was given a charter by the legislative assembly and again Wilkin was an incorporator. However, this line was meant to go only from St. Paul to the state's southern boundary. Wilkin turned up again as one of the organizers of the Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad Company. In January 1854, during a party celebrating Benjamin Franklin's birthday, Wilkin toasted still another, the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, the plans for which he indicated were somewhat nebulous:

"Whether the railroad embraced in the toast would ever be carried into effect is doubtful, but one thing is certain, all parties and all sections are becoming more and more interested in its success. Difficulties are in the way which might retard it—jealous feelings are springing up in consequence of the various rival routes, and particularly for the Northern route.... The most practical route is the one that should pass through our midst... A bill has been introduced into Congress to further this end..."

The party ended on a frivolous note, a final toast to "Woman." Ever the gallant, Wilkin responded that he had been called a lady's man and that he would only say that he had "never been made any the worse

by his association with gentle and virtuous females."

At the end of July, 1854, a great row broke out involving John P. Owens, editor of the *Minnesotian* a Whig paper, and Wilkin and his friends. It was symptomatic of one of the great journalistic battles of that period. This was the scramble among publishers for appointment as territorial printer, a political and financial plum that involved the printing of all public documents, with the bills paid by the government. The row began with Owens' claim that Wilkin owned the St. Paul *Daily Times*, which had just entered an already overcrowded field that included at least five other St. Paul newspapers. The claim was odd because Wilkin, a fellow Whig, apparently had only a minority interest in the *Times*. But the subject was worried in many inches of print with no holds barred and language that, to today's reader, seems incredible. Owens seems to have fired first:

"The bona fide owner of the *Times* is one of the most unscrupulous 'land sharks' and claim dealers in St. Paul," the *Minnesotian* declared. "The tone of that paper sounds just as though he was pulling the wires of his automaton, the editor, and compelling him to grind out this doleful music, in order to frighten the well secured, but uninformed claimants into selling their claims for a mere song. Lest there should be some misunderstanding in regard to the person to whom we allude, we will state his name in full — Alex Wilkin." The *Times* responded: "The assertion that Mr. Wilkin is 'the bona fide owner' of the *Times* is a brazen-faced falsehood uttered in the style and manner only peculiar to John P. Owens. We brand him as a liar and call upon him for his proof... *Minnesotian* takes occasion to traduce—a man with a heart larger than the whole body of John B. Owens — one of the few men who a few years ago furnished the money that filled the spoon that fed John P. Owens — a man whom John P. Owens sold last fall to his political opponents, for less than thirty pieces of silver, and for which he is now receiving his reward. This Judas Iscariot, John P. Owens is the editor, who, to gratify a personal, vindictive spirit of revenge, singles out a respectable and worthy citizen, and thus slanderously holds him up to the community. His whole article is a base fabrication from beginning to end, and will only tend to add a double degree of infamy that will perpetuate his name."

'...property will go up...'

At some point, sanity evidently prevailed. Wilkin, at any rate, seems to have had other matters on his mind. Near the end of 1853 he had made a pro-

phetic comment in a letter to his father: "This is now the great point in the Country to which the eyes of speculators are turned and property will go up as it did at the same period in the history of Chicago and St. Louis; but look out for a similar crash in a year or two more." Later, he returned to the subject:

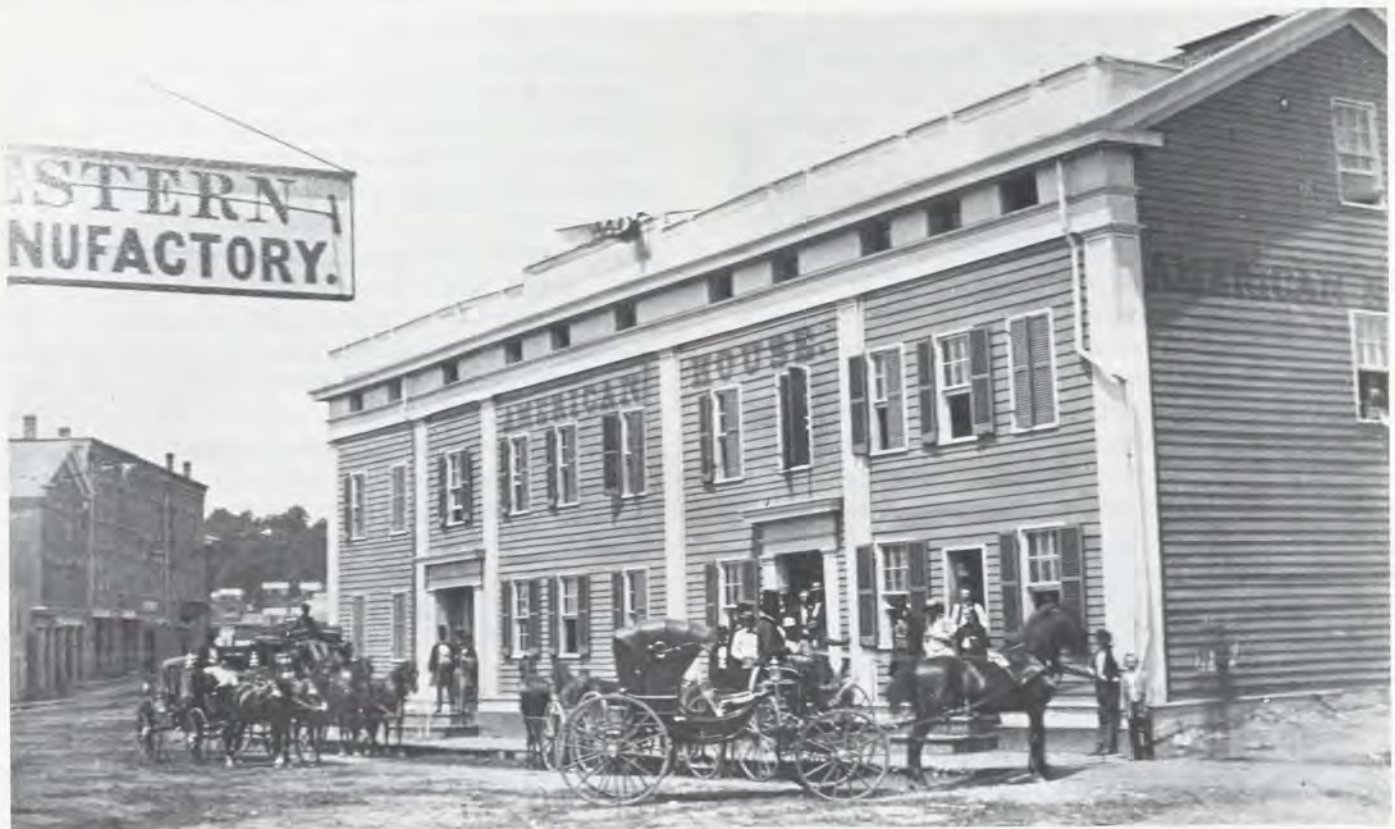
"Everything is prosperous," he reassured his father, "& money quite abundant...I have but a few debts pressing...our railroad grant will pass the last of this month & will give an impetus to property. I am fearful, however, that the present property as spirit of speculation is the prelude of a reaction. I do not think, however, that it will occur this year - or the next unless we have war."

He was wrong only on the timing. The Panic of 1857 overtook Minnesotans, as it did the rest of the country, with the failure of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company of New York on August 24, 1857. For present-day readers who lived through the stock market crash of 1929, to say nothing of the precipitous market fall-offs of 1987 and this fall of 1989, it's instructive to review once again J. Fletcher Williams' description in his St. Paul history of this disastrous event:

"This mad, crazy reckless spirit of speculation, which characterized those times, was

appalling....Perhaps in no city of America was the real estate mania and reckless trading and speculation so wild and extravagant as in St. Paul....this pricking of the bubble of speculation was more ruinous and dire in its consequences than perhaps to any other city in the west. Everything had been so inflated and unreal—values purely fictitious, all classes in debt, with but little real wealth, honest industry neglected, and everything speculative and feverish—that the blow fell with ruinous force. Business was paralyzed, real estate actually valueless and unsaleable at any price, and but little good money in circulation. Ruin stared all classes in the face. The notes secured by mortgages must be paid, but all values were destroyed. No device would raise money, for no one had any to lend. Everybody was struggling to save himself. The banking houses closed their doors—nearly all the mercantile firms suspended or made assignments. All works of improvement ceased, and general gloom and despondency settled down on the community. In a few days, from the top wave of prosperity, it was plunged into the slough of

*The American House at Third and Exchange Streets, now Seven Corners. One of the first of St. Paul's hotels, this was a popular gathering place and the scene of many merry parties Wilkin attended.*



despond.

"And now the 'hard times' commenced in earnest. No description of this terrible and gloomy period will convey any idea of it. With many, even those who had but shortly before imagined themselves wealthy, there was a terrible struggle between pride and want, but few had saved anything, so generally had the reckless spirit of the times infested all classes. The humble poor, of course, suffered; but the keenest suffering was among those who experienced the fall from affluence to poverty.

"The papers were crowded for months with foreclosures of mortgages, executions, and other results of the crash. Not one in five of the business houses or firms weathered the storm, despite the most desperate struggles. The population of the city fell off almost 50 percent, and stores would scarcely rent at any price."

Like many others, Wilkin, who was in the East at the time, also felt the effects of the panic. He told his father that, "[Weck] writes rather gloomily...he has been able, however, to meet my obligations so far...I think real estate will be a long time in recovering but if I can pay off part of [my] debts and get others reduced to lower rates of interest, I shall weather the storm easily, if I am economical, which I intend to be...."

He still believed himself affluent with an income of more than \$3,000 from his salary as Secretary of the Territory, his rents and his law business, and by the summer of 1858 he was optimistic enough to declare, in one letter home, that, "I consider myself worth at least 8 to 10 thousand dollars and no man in the Territory has a better credit."

But in 1859 Wilkin told his brother, Weck, that, "Money matters are growing worse all the time. I cannot borrow any money." And through the rest of that year he wrote about high interest rates prevailing in St. Paul and repeatedly used the phrase, "there is no money here." He described for his sister, Sarah, how he and Weck were facing these circumstances.

"...I am living very comfortably this winter. I have two nicely furnished rooms, taken care of, and meals furnished by a family in the house for Weck and myself, we furnishing the provisions & having whatever we want. We live principally on venison, trout, partridges, prairie chickens, oysters, ham, sausages, with occasionally salt pork and corned beef. We drink the best kinds of tea, coffee and chocolate, with occasionally a glass of good wine. The whole expense including rent is less than \$8 a week for both."

By October of 1860, Wilkin could finally announce in a letter to his father that, "Business is

improving." That year a Democratic political military club was organized with Captain Alexander Wilkin in command of the military unit. The officers would later serve in Company A, First Regiment of Minnesota Volunteers at the outbreak of the Civil War. Only one would survive the war.

Wilkin was also once again deep into politics, this time as a Democrat. He was nominated as a candidate for state senator. Also nominated for the senate was James C. Burbank who at the end of the war would succeed Wilkin as president of St. Paul Fire and Marine.

The fall of Fort Sumter on April 13, 1861, changed the nation and the lives of many. With Wilkin in command of Company A, the First Minnesota Volunteers became the first regiment to be tendered to President Lincoln for the defense of the Union. As a colonel in command of a brigade, he lost his life at the battle of Tupelo. He became Minnesota's highest ranking officer to be killed in the war. He is remembered for his bravery in combat. In his honor, a Minnesota county was named after him and his statue stands in the northeast corner of the state capitol.

## Footnotes

1. For the most part, this article is based on the letters of Alexander Wilkin and his family: father Samuel J. Wilkin, mother Sarah G. Wilkin, sister Sarah or Sally Wilkin, and brother Westcott or Weck Wilkin. The family home was originally in Goshen, New York.

2. Bonnie Barnak of The St. Paul Companies, Inc., public relations department, has been exceptionally helpful in making the company's Wilkin collection available and useful. More than that, she has been a resourceful critic to whom I am most grateful.

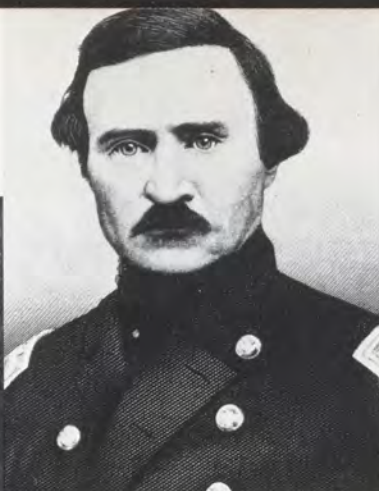
3. The newspaper quotes, with very few exceptions, are the result of prodigious research on the part of the late Robert Orr Baker, officer of The St. Paul Companies, Inc., and past president of the Ramsey County Historical Society. He discovered the Wilkin letters in Goshen. They were owned by a niece, Mrs. Edward Dikeman, who generously presented them to the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company.

4. To Virginia Kunz—pre-eminent author, editor, advisor and persuader—I am indebted for the superior guidance and assistance that brought about this article and those to come. RMH



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Sioux treaty chiefs on a visit to Washington D.C. See page 3.



Alexander Wilkin.  
See page 3.



Homeless men during the Great Depression.  
See page 17.



W.P.A. helper bathing her small charge.  
See page 17.

The Gibbs Farm Museum, owned by the Ramsey County Historical Society, at Cleveland and Larpenteur in Falcon Heights.



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