

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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On the Cover: The Sibley House at Mendota, home of fur trader Henry Hastings Sibley who was Minnesota's first governor, was in a state of general decay when this picture was taken in 1904. Even so, the old stone house was a favorite gathering spot for such groups as the Native Sons of Minnesota who posed for their picture during their first annual picnic. This and all other pictures on the following pages are, unless otherwise credited, from the Minnesota Historical Society's collection.

A Fateful Decade—

The Negroes in Minnesota And the Role They Played

By Earl Spangler

THE YEARS between 1850 and 1860 were a fateful decade which brought the United States to the threshold of civil war fought, in part, over the problem of slavery.

The status of the Negro and the extension of slavery already had become inextricably intertwined. During these crucial 10 years, the Negroes of Minnesota played an unconscious but a directly important role in the politics of first the territory, then the state, of Minnesota. The mere fact of their presence on Minnesota soil exerted an influence out of all proportion to their numbers.

In 1850 there were just 39 free Negroes in the territory. Only 259 were listed in the 1860 census.¹ Some Negroes who entered the area early had been used in the fur trade. Others became interpreters and missionaries. A few came with the army to Fort Snelling, including the famous Dred Scott.* Some were free while others re-

About the Author: Dr. Earl Spangler is associate professor of history at Macalester College, St. Paul. A faculty member there since 1949, he formerly taught at Oklahoma State University, received his doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1960. He is the author of The Negro in Minnesota (Denison Press, Minneapolis, 1961) and Bibliography of Negro History (Ross and Haines, Minneapolis, 1963), currently is working on a book on the Negroes in the United States to be published in the fall of 1965 by Lerner Press, Minneapolis. An article on the Negro and the Upper Midwest will appear in the 1964 Transactions of the Manitoba Historical Society. A lieutenant colonel in the army reserves, he is commanding officer of the 407th Civil Affairs Company at Fort Snelling.

mained in slavery.²

But in whatever status or capacity he was found, the Negro was physically present, politically an issue and morally a problem.

By 1861, as the nation prepared to go to war over the state of the union, no territory or prospective state could be immune from the bitterness and animosity that finally led to armed conflict.

Most of the problems afflicting the nation during the last years of peace were to be found within Minnesota—issues such as the extension of slavery into non-slave districts, Negro-white accommodations, abolitionism and the admission of a state on a slave or free basis. But most clear-thinking Minnesotans also realized that the controversy was not just political. It also was a moral and ethical issue which eventually would become part of legislation and party platforms, not only in 1860 but for generations to come.

MORE SPECIFICALLY, it was in Ramsey county with its capitol and its emerging political parties that the issues were joined. As elsewhere in the United States, no political party could avoid the question of the Negro and his status, no aspirant to political office could afford to remain silent.

With settlement in Minnesota not too widespread at this time, Ramsey and Hennepin Counties and a few other counties to the south along the rivers constituted the base of population and political life. Ramsey County also had a great share of the Negro population and thus these issues were more of immediacy and proximity there. They were not entirely local issues, of course, but they were being debated nonetheless. No area with political

*Dred Scott was brought to Fort Snelling during the 1830's as the slave of an army surgeon from Missouri. In 1838 Scott was taken back to Missouri, a slave state. In 1846 he sued for his free-

life could escape the divisiveness of the times and the struggle wrote a permanent page in state and territorial history.

During these last 10 years of peace, the Negro issue was responsible for creating a division in the Democratic party; for the gradual eclipse of the old Whig party and the emergence of the new Republican party. It was at the core of the crusading of a militant feminist who was called the "Mother of the Republican Party." It was responsible for the freeing of a slave in a state court in defiance of a decision of the United States Supreme Court.

Finally, the Negro issue established the procedure for amending the state's constitution which was to last for years to come.

ALTHOUGH it was not until the 1850's that the Negro became an issue in Minnesota's political development, the national struggle over the extension of slavery began during the years when Minnesota was little more than unexplored Indian country. After 1820 when the major problem of the extension of slavery was resolved temporarily by the Missouri Compromise, the pattern of Negro slavery in the United States was set. From then on, it became a competitive and moralistic question between major sections of the country as to which system would endure. Little by little, the areas of compromise dwindled until, by 1861, war was virtually inevitable.

With the emergence of political parties after Minnesota became a territory in 1849, political choice fell mainly between Whigs and Democrats. The latter held a heavy edge over their rivals.³ There never was much doubt that sentiment throughout the area was basically anti-slavery. This did not mean that the territory was

dom on the grounds that his residence in the Minnesota area, where slavery was forbidden by the Missouri Compromise, made him a free man. The state circuit court of St. Louis County ruled in his favor but the decision was reversed by the Missouri State Supreme Court. The case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court which ruled that it had no jurisdiction. This decision actually meant that, in the eyes of the court, Scott still was a slave since he had returned to Missouri without protest. Slaves were not citizens and had no right to sue in the federal courts. The decision, announced on March 6, 1857, aroused violent public reaction because the court went beyond the scope of the case. Seven of the nine justices were Democrats and five of the Democrats were southerners. They seized this opportunity to declare that the Missouri Compromise was unconstitutional, in their opinion, and that slavery could not be excluded from the territories.



It was in St. Paul, the capital of the territory and later the state of Minnesota, that the issues involving the status of the Negro were joined. The drawing above, by Robert Ormsby Sweeny, is of the Central House, the territory's first capitol.

anti-Southern, nor did it always mean that a person or a region was pro-abolitionist, Free Soil, Whig, Democratic or, later in the decade, Republican.

Anti-slavery sentiments were not always divorced from a belief in white supremacy. Such conflicting feelings existed in Minnesota and in Ramsey County.⁴

IN 1852, a St. Paul newspaper described Minnesota Negroes as "Attentive to their business and . . . no idlers as they are represented to be in the slave states. . . . They are a useful class and here on the confines of Barbarism do as much to put a civilized aspect upon the face of society as any other class." Yet, two years later there was a "Black Law" introduced in the territorial legislature that would have required all persons of Negro blood to give bond of \$300 to \$500 as a guarantee of good behavior. It was defeated 10 to six in the territorial House.⁵

The favorable comments of 1852 and the defeat of the "Black Law" in 1854 do not necessarily indicate a pro-Negro sentiment throughout Minnesota. In 1859, a southern Minnesota newspaper stated that there was not one Negro in its town and probably not one in the whole county. The paper concluded: "It is often remarked by visitors that we are peculiarly blessed in this respect."⁶

Throughout the 1850's, the slavery issue and the status of the Negro became matters of increasing political interest in Minnesota. Nationally, the Democratic party split into Northern and Southern factions and the Whig party started on its way to oblivion. The political scene became confused and emotional.

SUCH PARTY alignments and realignments were certain to be reflected in the politics of Minnesota. Northern Democrats, who favored popular sovereignty—leaving the question of slavery to the settlers of the territories themselves—moved toward Stephen Douglas as their champion. Prominent in this group were Henry H. Sibley, first territorial delegate to Congress and first governor of the state, and Earle S. Goodrich, editor of the *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*. Henry M. Rice, later United States senator and Sibley's rival, favored the Southern Democrats, as did President James Buchanan. They opposed any attempt to legislate against slavery.⁷

In 1856, a correspondent from St. Paul wrote to the *New York Tribune* stating that "the immigration into the territory . . . is almost a unit on the demand, 'No more slavery aggression.'" The *Tribune*, in an editorial on the slavery situation, decried the money and patronage enjoyed by Democrats and proslavery elements in the territory.⁸

Jane Grey Swisshelm, militant feminist and crusading editor from St. Cloud, vigorously campaigned against slavery and pro-slavery Democrats in Minnesota. Her campaign began on a moral and ethical plane but it soon became a partisan issue.

In December, 1857, Mrs. Swisshelm stated that "human chattledom is unconstitutional in any association professing to receive either" the Bible or the Constitution of the United States as "fundamental law." She castigated Minnesota Democratic leadership under Sylvanus B. Lowry, a wealthy St. Cloud settler. He was former adjutant general of the territory, a Tennessean by birth and pro-slavery in sentiment and politics. Her feud with Lowry had violent and unexpected results. One night in March of 1858, Lowry and two other men broke into the office of the *St. Cloud Visitor*, Mrs. Swisshelm's newspaper. The men smashed the press, scattered some of the type outside in the street and threw the



Dred Scott sued for his freedom on the basis of his residency in Minnesota but eventually lost his appeal in a landmark decision. Picture from the files of the Missouri Historical Society.

rest of it into the Mississippi.

UNDAUNTED, Mrs. Swisshelm soon was back in business as publisher of the *St. Cloud Democrat* and chastising the Reverend Thomas Calhoun, Presbyterian minister and Lowry's brother-in-law. A resident of Tennessee, Calhoun was visiting in Minnesota and had brought a slave girl with him. She gave birth to a child. Contrary to Mrs. Swisshelm's understanding about Calhoun's intentions, he sent both mother and child to Tennessee and into continued slavery.⁹ To Mrs. Swisshelm, this was another nefarious action by the pro-slavery interests.

By November, 1858, Mrs. Swisshelm was speaking before the anti-slavery groups that were beginning to form in the Minneapolis area. Although she had considered herself a Democrat, she now found herself identified more and more with the emerging Republican party.

She became known as the "Mother of the Republican Party" in Minnesota and she supported William Seward for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination. She was not at all enthusiastic when Lincoln, whom she considered moderate if not ambiguous on the slavery issue, won over

Seward in the Chicago convention.¹⁰

Thus the Negro issue contributed increasingly to the political divisiveness in Minnesota. Since the territory had become a state in 1858 and would have a voice in the election of 1860, the stakes were high. The Republican party, which had shown real strength in the presidential election of 1856 and even more in the Congressional elections of 1858, wanted Minnesota's electoral votes. The Douglas Democrats also wanted them and competition thrived under these circumstances.

THERE ALSO were economic overtones. For some years Southerners had vacationed in Minnesota and had brought their slaves with them. Anti-slavery people objected because slavery was forbidden under the state's 1858 Constitution. Pro-slavery and pro-Southern elements could see no harm in such visits. They brought business into the area, they were of a transitory nature and, after the Dred Scott Decision, the pro-slavery people considered the presence of Negro slaves in the area to be legal.

In time, however, there were rumors that these slaveholders might find themselves relieved of their chattels, legally or otherwise, as long as they were on Minnesota soil. The *Stillwater Democrat* invited the slaveholders to continue their visits but admitted that some of them might not feel too comfortable "on account of the intermeddling propensities of Abolition fanatics."¹¹

Within a year after this statement, the Eliza Winston case had been decided in the Hennepin District Court. Mrs. Winston, slave of a visiting Mississippi planter, was freed as the result of a collusive suit and agitation by Mrs. Winston, abolitionists and newspapermen in the area. The judge held that, despite the Dred Scott Decision, Article I, Section 2, of the Minnesota Constitution prohibited slavery and that was binding.¹²

DESPITE similar efforts by abolitionists, other slaves in Minnesota remained loyal to their masters. But the slaveholders, their hosts and the hotel and resort operators were apprehensive. When a small depression occurred in the Minneapolis area, the pro-Southern elements claimed that the anti-slavery agitation was the cause of it. In rebuttal, they were advised by the anti-slavery elements to put "gold on one scale and liberty on the other." The Republicans declared that the party's platform would not be altered even if thousands of slaveholders came north to spend their money.¹³

Political divisions were reflected in the newspapers of St. Paul, even after the start of the war. In May of 1863, a steamboat

Mrs. Swisshelm's home and newspaper office in St. Cloud. She ceased publication of the *St. Cloud Visiter* when she became involved in a libel suit, began publishing the *St. Cloud Democrat* instead, a maneuver which simply involved a change of names.





Jane Grey Swisshelm was a militant feminist and editor.

out of St. Louis brought to St. Paul a cargo of 125 Negroes and 150 mules. The boat was to take 800 to 900 Indians back to St. Louis and thence up the Missouri River for relocation in the Dakotas. It was suggested by the Democratically-inclined *St. Paul Pioneer* that the mules remain but that the Negroes and Indians be sent to Massachusetts.¹⁴

In that same month, 218 more Negroes arrived and were attacked by some Irish laborers who saw an economic threat in addition to the political issue. The *St. Paul Daily Press* deplored the attack and stated that the Negroes "furnish(ed) another proof of their superiority over their Kilkenny persecutors by the favorable contrast of their quiet, civil and inoffensive manner."¹⁵

One of the last facets of Negro influence in the pre-Civil War years pertained to the admission of Minnesota to the union. Entry of the territory as a free state naturally stirred up controversy. The balance of power had turned toward the free states upon the admission of California in 1850. The issue had become more intense after the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 provided for popular sovereignty.

It was conceivable that Minnesota would have to recognize this principle which would, in turn, divide the parties even further. Since the Republican party stood



Sylvanus B. Lowry, a pro-slavery politician, aroused her wrath.

pledged against any further extension of slavery, its members hardly could accept the principle of popular sovereignty. The Dred Scott case, in essence, negated popular sovereignty and gave credence to free movement of slaves to any area in the union.

DEBATES in Congress from 1856 to 1858 revolved, in part, around the issues of Negro residency and status in Minnesota, particularly on the matter of suffrage. There were attempts to amend the Enabling Act to limit suffrage in Minnesota to citizens of the United States. Since Negroes were not considered citizens, such proposals would deny suffrage to the Minnesota Negro even though he was a free man.

Obviously, the Negro question had become part of the statehood question. Other debates referred to the dangers of Negro voting, the destruction of what little equilibrium was left in the Senate and the problem of slaves flocking north to take advantage of free soil.¹⁶

Within the territory, the state constitutional convention had begun to grapple with the important task of devising a suitable document. The two major parties contended for control. The convention split into two "conventions," each of which wrote its own document. The Democrats saw the struggle as one between "white supremacy"

and Negro equality. They declared that the Republicans, in their desire to gain control of state and national offices, would allow Negroes to vote and serve in state offices. This would, in turn, allow the Republicans to influence the election of 1860.¹⁷

THE NEGRO ISSUE made at least one lasting contribution to the history of the state. The main issue that deadlocked both "conventions" was that of Negro suffrage. It was turned over to a conference committee made up of members of both "conventions." The committee proposed the McClure Resolution which, when written into law, became the way by which all amendments to the state constitution were accomplished up to 1898. In essence, it provided that any proposed amendment would have to be submitted to the electorate and be approved by a "majority of votes cast on that subject." Apparently, this solution was compromise enough for one side and postponement enough for the other, and so a disagreement over Negro suffrage produced the procedure as to how to amend the constitution.¹⁸

Again, it must be said that the number of Negroes in the state had little to do with the injection of the Negro issue into politics. By 1858, each state was a microcosm of the nation and Minnesota was no different. The physical presence of Negroes determined, in part, the political choices of white residents. The status of Negroes was a matter of concern to all. It was a period in which passions were inflamed. Political parties stood ready to capitalize on any issue that might contribute toward effective control of the government, state and national.

The split in the state Democratic party divided voters between the Douglas and Breckinridge candidacies in the presidential election of 1860. Undoubtedly, this weakened the Democratic vote, although the final figures indicated that the Republicans would have won the state anyway. Lincoln received almost twice as many votes as the combined totals of Douglas and Breckinridge.¹⁹ It was the Negro issue that had created this realignment and contributed still further to the end of Democratic domination of state politics for decades to come.

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue W., St. Paul, Minn.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958 the Society erected a barn, behind the house, which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey county will be preserved for future generations.