

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

Geological Forces  
That Shaped  
St. Paul

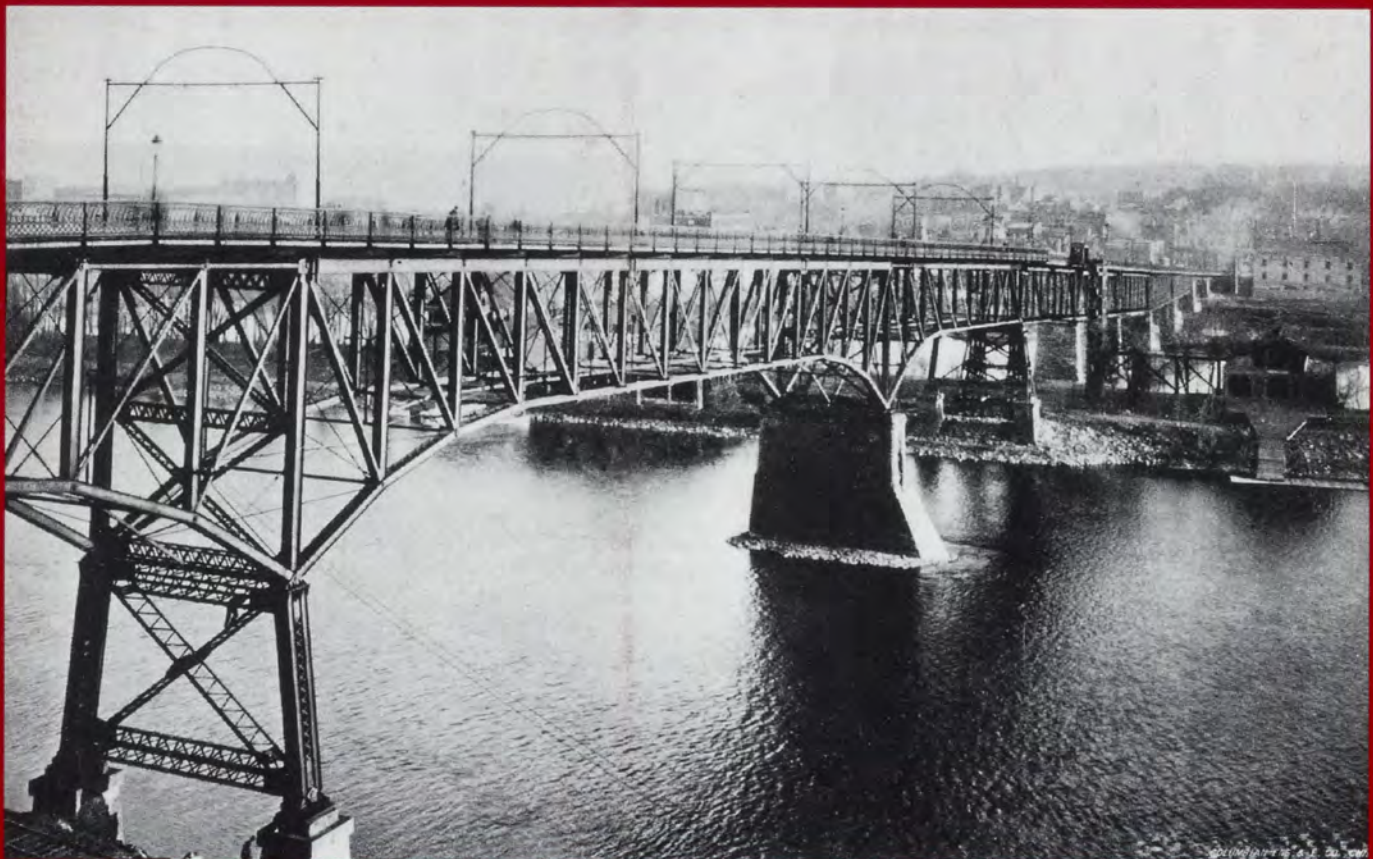
*Page 13*

**Summer, 1997**

Volume 32, Number 2

*Last of Its Kind in Minnesota*  
**The 1888–89 Wabasha Street Bridge**

*Page 4*



*The Wabasha Street Bridge, constructed between 1888 and 1889. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article beginning on page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

Executive Director  
Priscilla Farnham  
Editor  
Virginia Brainard Kunz

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

John M. Lindley  
Chair

Laurie Zenner  
President

Howard M. Guthmann  
First Vice President

Evangeline Schroeder  
Second Vice President

Charles H. Williams, Jr.  
Secretary

Robert F. Garland  
Treasurer

Arthur H. Baumeister, Jr., Alexandra Bjorklund, W. Andrew Boss, Mark Eisenschenk, Joanne A. Englund, John M. Harens, Marshall R. Hatfield, Judith Frost Lewis, George A. Mairs, Margaret M. Marrinan, J. S. Micallef, Richard T. Murphy, Sr., Thomond O'Brien, Bob Olsen, Marvin J. Pertzik, Fred Perez, James A. Russell, Vicenta D. Scarlett, Richard A. Wilhoit, Anne Cowie Wilson.

### EDITORIAL BOARD

John M. Lindley, chairman; Thomas H. Boyd, Thomas C. Buckley, Pat Hart, Laurie M. Murphy, Vicenta Scarlett.

### HONORARY ADVISORY BOARD

Elmer L. Andersen, Olivia I. Dodge, Charlton Dietz, William Finney, Otis Godfrey, Jr., Ronald Hachey, Robert S. Hess, Fred T. Lanners, Jr., D. W. "Don" Larson, George Latimer, Frank Marzitelli, Joseph S. Micallef, Robert Mirick, Samuel Morgan, Marvin J. Pertzik, J. Jerome Plunkett, James Reagan, Solly Robins, Rosalie E. Wahl, Donald D. Wozniak.

### RAMSEY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Commissioner Susan Haigh, chairman  
Commissioner Tony Bennett  
Commissioner Dino Guerin  
Commissioner Rafael Ortega  
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt  
Commissioner Janice Rettman  
Commissioner Jan Wiessner

Terry Schutten, manager, Ramsey County

*Ramsey County History* is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102 (612-222-0701). Printed in U.S.A. Copyright, 1997, Ramsey County Historical Society. ISSN Number 0485-9758. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission from the publisher. The Society assumes no responsibility for statements made by contributors.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 32, Number 2

Summer, 1997

## CONTENTS

- 3 Letters
- 4 Last of Its Kind in Minnesota  
The Old Wabasha Street Bridge and How It  
Linked East to West  
*Demian J. Hess*
- 13 Millions of Years in the Making  
The Geological Forces That Shaped St. Paul.  
*Edmund C. Bray*
- 16 No Grass Beneath Her Feet:  
Harriet Bishop and Her Life in Minnesota  
*Norma Sommerdorf*
- 22 Growing Up in St. Paul  
West Seventh Street: Czechs, Slovaks, Bohemians  
And Kolache Dough Rising in the Warm Attic  
*Emily Panushka Erickson*
- 27 Books

Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

### A Message from the Editorial Board

**R**amsey County History returns to the area's beginnings in this summer issue. In his article on the Wabasha Street Bridge, author Demian J. Hess not only provides a detailed history of this well-known, now-vanished landmark, but also establishes its centrality to the growth of the city of St. Paul in the second half of the nineteenth century. A companion article by Edmund C. Bray tells the geological story of the mighty natural forces that created the Mississippi river, which the Wabasha Street Bridge eventually would span.

Returning to the era before the bridge was built, Norma Sommerdorf chronicles the arrival of Harriet Bishop in St. Paul a century-and-a-half ago and describes Bishop's many contributions to the educational, moral and religious development of St. Paul's young people over a thirty-six year period. Finally, Emily Panushka Erickson recalls her years of growing up in St. Paul's West Seventh Street neighborhood. Although this issue of our magazine spans in time the Ice Ages to the present-day replacement of the Wabasha Street Bridge, its focus is squarely on how St. Paul and Ramsey County have grown and changed over time, whether measured in geological ages or human years.

*John M. Lindley, chair, Editorial Board*

## Janet Erickson Remembers The Society in Her Will



*Janet L. Erickson*

Janet L. Erickson was born in St. Paul, went to school there and retired there, but a love of travel, an abiding interest in history and genealogy, and a fascination with exotic places and people, led her to live many of her years in Africa, East Asia, and India.

Born in 1920 into a family with Swedish and Norwegian ancestry, she graduated from the University of Minnesota's School of Nursing in 1941 on the brink of the United States' entry into World War II. For the next four years, she served with the army's 26th General Hospital through the North African campaigns, the landing at Anzio, and the fighting in Italy. She ended the war as a first lieutenant, then returned to the University of Minnesota to earn a master's degree in nursing in 1947. During the next few years, she taught at Syracuse University and the University of California at San Francisco, but far places beckoned.

In the mid-1960s, she joined the Agency for International Development and served in Sierra Leone for three years before joining the World Health Organization and a post first in Ahmedabad, India, and next in Bangkok, Thailand. In 1974, she was ordered to Delhi to fill a vacant Regional Nursing Advisor position, an assignment that took her back to Thailand, but also to Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In her many letters to family and friends, she vividly described some of her experiences:

"...I saw the mountains which ring

---

# No Grass Beneath Her Feet

## Harriet Bishop and Her Life in Minnesota

*Norma Sommerdorf*

When Harriet Bishop arrived in St. Paul in July, 1847, she came with the belief that she had work to do. She already knew the wild reputation of the frontier river town whose name had been changed only six years earlier from Pig's Eye to St. Paul. In a classroom in Albany, New York, she had listened as the instructor read a letter:

My present residence is on the utmost verge of civilization in the northwestern part of the United States, within a few miles of the principal village of white men in the territory that we suppose will bear the name of Minnesota. . . . The village referred to has grown up within a few years in a romantic situation on a high bluff of the Mississippi. . . . The Dakotas call it *Im-mi-ja-ska* (white rock) from the color of sandstone which forms the bluff on which the village stands. This village has five stores, as they call them, at all of which intoxicating drinks constitute a part, and I suppose the principal part, of what they sell. . . . The village contains a dozen or twenty families living near enough to send to school. Since I came to this neighborhood, I have had frequent occasions to visit the village, and have been grieved to see so many children growing up entirely ignorant of God, and unable to read his Word, with no one to teach them. Unless your society can send them a teacher, there seems little prospect of their having one for several years. . . . More than half of the parents of these children are unable to read themselves, and care very little about having their children taught. . . .

Perhaps Harriet Bishop glanced at the other classmates in this seminar for teachers and wondered if any were ready to respond to this call. She was more mature than the other young women and already had taught school for several years in New York State. Catharine Beecher continued reading:



*Harriet Bishop. Photo from the Minnesota Historical Society.*

One woman told me she had four children she wished to send to school, and that she would provide board and room in her house to a good female teacher, for the tuition of her children. A teacher for this place should love the Savior, and for his sake should be willing to forego, not only many of the religious privileges and elegances of New England towns, but some of the neatness also. She should be entirely free from prejudice on account of color, for among her scholars she might find not only English, French, and Swiss, but Sioux and Chippewa, with some claiming kindred with the African stock. A teacher coming should bring books with her sufficient to begin a school, as there is no bookstore within three hundred miles.

The letter was signed by Thomas Williamson, a missionary doctor who lived across the Mississippi at Kaposia, a Dakota village below St. Paul.

Harriet Bishop wrote that this was the first time she had heard of St. Paul, or even of Minnesota, but she felt at once

that she must go there. Later, when the question was asked of the class, "Who will go to St. Paul?" she wrote that she was trembling when she answered, "Here am I, send me."

The letter Catharine Beecher read to the class that day had been addressed to the National Board of Popular Education, sponsor of the class. Harriet Bishop was the first person in Catharine Beecher's class to volunteer to go west to start a school.

Harriet Bishop's childhood was spent in northern Vermont on the shores of the immense Lake Champlain. She was born in the village of Panton on January 1, 1817, the third daughter of Putnam and Miranda Bishop. The town of Panton is at Arnold's Bay, where Benedict Arnold sank his fleet of five ships during the Revolutionary War. Next door to the Bishop family lived Primas Storms, a former slave to an aide to General Washington. His family included daughter Jane, so the information that the school in St. Paul would have children of other races was not new to Harriet. She knew James Ten-Broeke, Panton's school teacher, well because he was also a member of the Baptist church which her family attended. It is likely that he influenced her to become a teacher. At thirteen she had become the youngest member of the church.

After finishing her early schooling, Harriet took a teacher's training course at nearby Fort Edward, New York. She then began teaching in the public schools of Essex County, a short ferry ride across the lake from her home. For a time she served as principal at the Moriah Academy in Moriah, New York. It is likely that her older sisters, Velma and Almira, married during the years Harriet was teaching school, and after her mother's death in May, 1846, Harriet was left with few ties to Vermont.



Little Crow's village, as it appeared in 1848, a year after Harriet Bishop's arrival in Minnesota. From a drawing by Henry Lewis, Minnesota Historical Society collections.

Her friends were opposed to her plan to travel to the western wilderness, but to Harriet their protests were incentives—it meant going to a place where she was truly needed. In her autobiographical account, *Floral Home or First Days of Minnesota*, she wrote that “I went to St. Paul because I was more needed there than any other spot on earth, and because there was no other one of my class who felt it a duty to come.”

Harriet's trip began with travel to Palmyra, New York, to stay with friends. She believed that a special providence was watching over her after she missed boarding the *Chesapeake*, a boat that sank in Lake Erie with all of its passengers on board. Taking a later boat to Cleveland, she stayed for some time with relatives and purchased the books and supplies which would not be available in St. Paul.

On the morning of July 10, 1847, Harriet Bishop arrived at Kaposia, also known as “Little Crow's village.” She was met by Dr. Williamson, the missionary who had written the letter, his sister, and a cluster of Dakota women wrapped in blankets, their hair streaming in the wind. She noted later that children were running about and babies peeked over the shoulder of each woman. The first Sunday she spent with the Williamson family and attended services at the mission house, near the site today of South St. Paul.

A few days later, Dr. Williamson arranged for her to be taken upriver about four miles in a canoe paddled by two Indian women to see the village of St. Paul. The town was filled with excitement and overrun with drivers of 121 Red River carts (handmade wooden wagons used to transport furs and buffalo skins from the Canadian border) waiting to be loaded on boats for transport to St. Louis. Harriet had a first-hand glimpse of the task before her as there was much drinking and carousing among the cart drivers who were celebrating the end of their long journey. Because of the unruly crowd, she went back to Kaposia, but returned a few days later by river boat to become a permanent resident, officially arriving at St. Paul on July 16, 1847.

The woman who landed there was described by an early writer as “of comely appearance; tall, with a good figure, a bright, expressive face; earnest and decided in manners, and quick in speech. She had an air of active business about her, and always seemed in a hurry. . . .”

Harriet Bishop opened a school almost immediately in the only building made available to her, a ten-by-twelve foot cabin that Scott Campbell had abandoned. It had been converted into a blacksmith shop, located at what is now Kellogg Boulevard and St. Peter Street. In the 1860s, this building was moved to Grand Avenue near Seventh Street and covered with siding. (A portion of the

building was uncovered and identified in 1953 by representatives of the Territorial Pioneers and the Minnesota Historical Society.)

She received a spontaneous greeting from her new students when she had to stoop to enter the low doorway of the log building, chinked with mud and covered with bark. Loose wooden boards covered the floor. Wooden pins were driven into the logs and boards placed across them for benches. A cross-legged table and a chair for the teacher were the only other furnishings. Harriet took the children outside to gather branches and soon the room was “converted into a rural arbor, fragrant evergreens concealing the rude walls.” She wrote that “a friendly hen, unwilling to relinquish her claim, on the ground of preoccupancy, daily placed a token of her industry in the corner, and made all merry with her loud cackle and abrupt departure. . . . An old pitcher, minus the handle, received the rarest specimens of wild flowers, from which our center table exhaled a generous perfume.”

While gathering the pine boughs, Harriet and her students stepped to the edge of the nearby sandstone cliff and “at our feet, flowed in silent majesty the Father of Waters, with two beautiful green islands reposing on its bosom, which have since been named Raspberry and Harriet Isles.” In a footnote to *Floral Home*, Harriet added that “this name is from the author of this book.”

At the end of the first week, Harriet reviewed her responsibilities. Though “disposed to allow everyone to enjoy his own opinion, provided he interfered not with others, the inhabitants of St. Paul were, in the main, scoffers at religion. For a single-handed and lone female to occupy a distinct and decided position in such a community was no trifling work.” In *Floral Home*, she wrote that when she closed the first week of school she invited the students to ask for their parents' permission to come back on Sunday, and on July 25, 1847, she conducted the first Sunday School in Minnesota. Seven children and one Indian woman attended. An older girl who spoke English, French, and Dakota acted as an interpreter. By the third week, the room was filled with

twenty-five children and numerous visitors.

During this time Harriet lived with John and Nancy Irvine (near present-day Seven Corners) who had offered her a place to stay in exchange for the education of their children. It was the largest house in the village, and it was Mrs. Irvine who had told Dr. Williamson of the need of a teacher for her five daughters, ages three to thirteen. The Irvine family and Harriet Bishop became warm friends, and when Nancy Irvine had a new baby in 1850, they named the child Harriet.

On January 9, 1848, Harriet wrote in her diary, "Cold! O, how cold! The bleak north wind nearly pierced the vitals on my long walk to Sunday School. No fire had been made, and that prefaced the duties to follow. . . ."

Almost immediately she began to agitate for a new school building and she organized the St. Paul Circle of Industry to help fund it. There were eight women members, including Mrs. Henry Jackson and Mrs. Jacob Bass (who, with their husbands, operated the first store and the first hotel in the village), Harriet Patch, and Nancy Irvine. They solicited funds from the community and made a presentation to officers at Fort Snelling where they received a contribution of \$50.

Several incidents during the first long winter left Harriet depressed and ill. In April, the Irvines' youngest daughter, Viola, sat in a pan of burning coals while playing with a kitten, and died after an agonizing two weeks. This tragedy had a profound effect on the Irvine household, including their boarder. She wrote that she fell ill in the spring of 1848 "after the constant exposure to those damp walls, and at the bedside of a dying child. . . . When the new building was declared finished, just one year from my arrival, I was on a bed of lingering illness."

Dr. Williamson came over to see her and arranged for "Old Betsy," a Dakota woman well-known to early residents, to take them by canoe to Kaposia. Harriet recuperated for several weeks, and returned to St. Paul "with a new impetus and double zest to enter upon duties in the new school room." In the fall of 1848, the school moved into the new school



St. Paul as a raw frontier village in 1858, eleven years after Harriet Bishop's arrival. This is Lambert's Block on the corner of Cedar and Third Streets in downtown St. Paul. The house at far left is the home of Henry Lambert, lawyer and future probate judge. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

building, which also served as a courtroom, lecture hall, church, and polling place. The women, who had planned to raise \$300 for a twenty-five-by-thirty-foot building, believed it would fill their needs for at least ten years. It soon proved inadequate, however, when thousands of new residents poured into St. Paul after Minnesota Territory was organized in 1849.

In May, 1849, Rebecca Marshall and her mother arrived in St. Paul as new residents. Rebecca Marshall Cathcart, when she was in her eighties, recalled those early days at a meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Those days are very vivid in my memory. The morning upon our arrival a Miss Bishop introduced herself to us as a schoolteacher, and asked my mother and me to take a walk with her and see the village, I might say, the Indian village. Our walk took us up a high hill at the rear of the hotel, from which we had a splendid view of the bluffs on either side of the river as far as Fort Snelling. All the surrounding country was in its primitive state, and the prospect was a glorious one; as we gazed around, there came to our notice Dayton's Bluff (not Dayton's then) on the

east; what is now Summit Avenue on the west; and the Wabasha bluff on the north. Could anything be grander than the view at that time?

She recalled that Harriet Bishop was always a welcome visitor in their home. Then an impressionable nineteen-year-old, Rebecca remembered Harriet's engagement to a lawyer, James K. Humphrey, who was eight years younger than herself, and that shortly before the wedding, his sister came to St. Paul and persuaded him to call off the wedding. He became clerk of District Court, married, and lived in St. Paul his entire life. When James Humphrey broke the engagement, Rebecca said her mother felt he was not worthy of her, and noted that Harriet took a long time to recover from this blow to her self-esteem, even questioning whether she should remain in St. Paul.

In the meantime, other teachers were arriving in the territory. Stillwater, larger than St. Paul at that time, applied to the National Board of Popular Education for a teacher, and Amanda Hosford was sent there in 1848. In the spring of 1849, William Slade visited Minnesota and brought three teachers with him, includ-

ing Mary Scofield, who came to assist in St. Paul. Teachers sent out by the Board were required to be self-supporting, but travel expenses to their first destination were paid.

In the Board's first report is a request from a teacher who may have been Harriet Bishop: "With little prospect of compensation beyond 'a room and board' . . . probably \$100 per annum . . . will suffice. . . ." This plea for a subsidy probably was denied by Slade during his visit and it may have been at his urging that the first issue of St. Paul's *Minnesota Pioneer*, dated April 28, 1849, states, "Miss Harriet E. Bishop will commence the next term of her School on Monday, the 30th day of April. All whose School bills are unpaid, will be expected to make immediate payment." The National Board considered \$150 a year, plus room and board, a minimum salary, but many averaged less, according to its reports.

On November 28, 1850, a school district was organized under the auspices of D. A. J. Baker, a teacher from New England, with Parsons K. Johnson as clerk. A tax of \$300 was voted to defray cost of the schoolhouse and to fund the ongoing education of St. Paul's children. In an 1847 letter to his sister, P. K. Johnson commented that an "intelligent lady has come to town whose society I highly prize," and he noted that he had helped her set up a Sunday School.

Harriet found the frontier town to be as filled with saloons as Dr. Williamson's letter had described. Every store sold liquor, and in a chapter titled "Rum's Doings" in *Floral Home*, she denounced the public drunkenness, domestic abuse, and street fighting in St. Paul. During navigation season, cargo after cargo of whiskey was deposited on the dock at Jackson Street to find its way to the lumber camps, the soldiers at the Fort, and the Indian villages. One morning Harriet saw from the school window a group of people gathered around an ox sled. Investigating, she found the body of a drunken man, frozen to death. Soon after this, several people inquired about starting a temperance society. Permission was granted to use the school for the first meeting. The society was organized on March 9, 1848, when the chaplain at Fort Snelling

delivered the first temperance address, and thirty persons signed a pledge of abstinence. In the spring of 1849, a division of the Sons of Temperance was organized, as well as a group of "Temperance Watchmen." In the years that followed, Harriet enlisted many of her former students in these organizations.

Harriet described an effort to forbid the sale of liquor in the new Territory, (based on a law in Maine), which passed in April, 1851. This had a disastrous effect on commerce in St. Paul, where many people had invested all their means in the sale of liquor. The constitutionality of the new law was soon tested, and a judge ruled that the governor and the Assembly had this power, and the vote of the people was declared invalid.

Harriet carried on the Sunday School she had started until the summer of 1848 when Abram Cavender, a blacksmith and wagon maker, moved to St. Paul with his family. The two of them led this interdenominational Sunday School until Methodist and Presbyterian leaders arrived in 1850 and the Sunday school was divided. Baptists continued to gather in

the school with a third of the students. As a result of a letter Harriet Bishop sent to the Baptist Home Mission Society, the Reverend John Parsons had arrived in Minnesota that spring and with her help organized the First Baptist Church of St. Paul on December 29, 1849.

January 1, 1850, three days after the church was organized, was Harriet Bishop's thirty-third birthday. An engraving of her on the frontispiece of her 1857 book reveals handsome, strong features, with dark hair parted in the center, cascading into ringlets at the neckline. She had been somewhat of a celebrity from the day of her arrival in St. Paul three years earlier. Although many had wives, only men are listed as settlers from 1838 to 1848, except for her. The Indians had given her the name *Woo-wan-pa Wa-ma-don-ka Wash-ta* (Good Book Woman).

The newly-formed First Baptist Church acquired a prominent piece of land, which came to be called Baptist Hill, in Lowertown, and building was begun. In 1851, the pastor went east to raise funds, but, robbed and beaten on the



*Harriet Bishop's honeymoon cottage? According to local legend, this cottage on Ryan Street in the Irvine Park Historic District was to be a honeymoon cottage for Harriet Bishop. The Ramsey County Historical Society's Historic Sites Survey lists the house as having been built by James K. Humphrey, an early St. Paul Lawyer, in 1851, about the time he was engaged to Harriet Bishop. He broke off the engagement, however, and sold the house to Charles L. Willis in 1853. It remained in the Willis family until 1903, and it still stands on its original site. Harriet Bishop married John McConkey, a widower with four children, in 1858. Ramsey County Historical Society photo.*

streets of New York, he died aboard a Mississippi river steamer on his way back to St. Paul. His funeral was the first service in the new church. To pay off the church mortgage, Harriet organized the St. Paul Baptist Sewing Society to do needlework for the people of the village.

Harriet Bishop returned east for visits several times between 1855 and 1859. At the time of a visit to an ailing sister, she arranged for the publication of her first book, *Floral Home or First Years of Minnesota*. In it she recorded her personal experiences, as well as the history of the area and promotion of it as a place to live. It is often a glowing account, as she wrote that "the climate of Minnesota is one of its greatest attractions. For healthfulness it is unsurpassed. . . . The atmosphere is bracing, exhilarating, invigorating and pure." Hers was one of several books published during this period that extolled the healthfulness of the Minnesota climate and the beauty of the landscape. Some of these books were published as travel guides; others were meant to entice new residents to move to the state.

During her visits east, Harriet became an agent for people who wanted to buy land in Minnesota. In one experience, she offered to obtain land in St. Paul for Palmer Havens, a man she had known in Moriah, New York. Havens had not sent enough money so she took out a mortgage on the property he wished to buy, but asked Torbet to sign the mortgage because she was buying land owned by James K. Humphrey, her former fiance. Eventually suit was brought against her when Havens refused to pay or acknowledge that she acted as his agent. She requested a second trial, and her testimony indicated she felt betrayed by several men who tried to obtain her signature (even inviting her to their home for dinner) on a paper that would have exonerated her opponent. After the sale fell through, Humphrey sold the lots to his sister-in-law, and she pursued title to the lots for several years.

St. Paul's real estate became highly inflated in the 1850s and real estate mania was out of control before it ended. St. Paul historian J. Fletcher Williams noted that many of St. Paul's citizens were ruined when the failure of the Ohio



First Baptist Church at Ninth and Wacouta Streets in St. Paul's Lowertown.

Life Insurance and Trust Company of New York precipitated the Panic of 1857 and brought down several local banks with it. The papers were crowded for months with mortgage foreclosures and other results of the crash. Harriet Bishop taught school at least through 1853, and it is not known if her work as an agent or the sale of her books made her financially independent after that date.

On September 12, 1858, after eleven years in Minnesota, Harriet married John McConkey, a widower with four children who lived on Wacouta near Sixth Street. Witnesses at the wedding were two St. Paul teachers, Miranda Marks and Gordon Haseltine. When the Civil War broke out, McConkey was mustered into the First Minnesota Infantry Regiment. In 1862, Harriet wrote Governor Alexander Ramsey, "when the call to arms was made, my husband cheerfully entered the ranks. . . . It seems that after these long months of discipline that he should be well qualified to take a higher position. . . ."

During these years, Harriet worked on her second long book, *Dakota War Whoop or Indian Massacres and War in*

*Minnesota, of 1862-63* It was published in 1864 after George Spencer, another teacher, provided her with first-hand accounts of his experiences, as did her old friend, Dr. Thomas Williamson. During the years her husband was away, she was also a mother to the McConkey children, and according to early church members, she brought them with her to church for several years. Son John, who later became a business man in Fergus Falls, stated that his mother had died when he was five, and that he lived with his grandparents until his father married Harriet Bishop.

McConkey fought at Bull Run, and was listed as a corporal when he was discharged for disability on February 16, 1863. The marriage, at least after he returned from the army, was filled with unhappiness and was dissolved in March, 1867, on grounds that John McConkey was an habitual drunkard. Eventually Harriet took the unusual step of having her maiden name restored by a special act of the Minnesota legislature.

In 1947, Zylpha Morton interviewed Mrs. A. B. Wells, a granddaughter of John McConkey, for an article in *Minnesota History*. She stated that at that time there still were people who remembered Harriet's graciousness and hospitality, and her furniture that was upholstered with her own needlepoint.

*The Poets and Poetry of Minnesota*, printed in 1864, included six poems by Harriet McConkey that revealed her longing for loved ones away at war, and for the family she left behind in Vermont. In a biographical sketch, she credited her father as "singularly gifted in mind and heart and possessing, with a warm imagination, an enthusiastic love of nature." She published a long poem, *Minnesota: Then and Now* in 1867, using the name Mrs. Harriet Bishop.

That same year she and several other women organized the Ladies Christian Union to provide assistance to needy persons and to establish the "Home for the Friendless." It was later called the Protestant Home, and is still in existence in St. Paul as Wilder Residence East.

Her former husband, John McConkey, died in Hebron, Illinois, in 1870. Harriet Bishop is not listed in city directories be-

## The National Board of Popular Education

In the spring of 1847, thirty-four women attended a short course on how to start a school in a rough frontier settlement. Catharine Beecher, daughter of famed clergyman Lyman Beecher and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had been concerned for several years that children were growing up in western communities without an education. She spent four years giving speeches and raising money before she founded the National Board of Popular Education and enlisted former Governor Slade of Vermont as general agent. These young women were to open schools to "aid and advance the cause of popular Christian education in our country" at a time when most students were educated in costly private or parochial schools. It flourished for six years and sent 450 teachers to towns from Ohio to California. Many were the only single women in their village, and they were expected to start a school and secure funds to keep it operating. Newspapers joked that the project was sending "wives to the west." Catharine Beecher severed ties with the organization to form the Milwaukee Female Academy in 1850. Harriet Bishop was a member of the first class of teachers trained, and the first person to volunteer to go west to open a school.

The 150th anniversary of her arrival in St. Paul was commemorated with a program July 27, 1997, on Harriet Island and the excursion steamer "Harriet Bishop," both named for her.

tween 1871 and 1874, and she may have moved to California during this time.

Harriet was active in the Minnesota Woman's Suffrage movement as one of its founders in 1881. Catharine Beecher had urged that women use their influence in the home and school to change society, rather than attempting to get the vote, but Harriet's involvement in the suffrage movement shows that her views had evolved since her years in New York.

Her fight in the cause of temperance, and her sad experience in marriage probably caused Harriet Bishop to become the first organizer of the Minnesota Woman's Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1877. At its first annual meeting, she reported that in six weeks in this position she had traveled 300 miles, visited fifteen towns, delivered thirty-four lectures and organized six unions, before she was stricken with illness and exhaustion.

After 1876, the *St. Paul City Directory* listed her as authoress and lecturer residing at 124 Broadway (442 Broadway after 1881). Her diaries, referred to by J. Fletcher Williams in his *History of the City of St. Paul*, and by Mrs. H. D. Gates in a *History of the First Baptist Church*, have never been recovered. The personal relationships and disappointments which left deep scars are not mentioned in her own writing. She chose instead to leave

records of her early attempts to educate and to organize the community.

The first school, church, and Sunday School were her favorite subjects. Several of these handwritten histories survive, labeled in neat handwriting on the front, "Return to D. D. Merrill," her close friend and founder of the St. Paul Book and Stationary Company. Preserved at the Minnesota Historical Society is a book in her own handwriting with photos outlined in rick-rack, relating the history of First Baptist Church and other church organizations. First Baptist Church built its present structure in 1875 when Harriet Bishop was fifty-seven, and she continued to worship there for eight more years until her death on August 8, 1883, at the age of sixty-six. She is buried in Oakland Cemetery. A monument commemorating her and the first pastor, who died on the river boat, was erected by the church in 1910.

Thomas Newson, author of *Pen Pictures of St. Paul, Minnesota and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, wrote at her death:

During her thirty-eight years in Minnesota [she] never halted, never tired, never stopped. Miss Bishop was thoroughly impressed with the belief that she had a work to do—a destiny that must be filled, and acting upon this impression she came among the

early settlers of this city, educated the young, taught religion, and aided in every way she could to elevate the scale of morality. Whatever else may be said of her, she was sincere and earnest. She taught, she wrote, she worked—all for the cause of God. . . . She was angular, positive, determined—such a woman as is necessary for frontier life.

Although Harriet Bishop is credited with starting the first continuously operated public school in Minnesota, she was aware that several schools had opened before her arrival (including those at Kaposia and Fort Snelling) and she herself never made that claim. Her earnestness and aggressiveness in championing causes made her unpopular with some, but she was not alone in promoting the cause of abstinence which eventually resulted in passage of the Prohibition Amendment in 1919, or of suffrage, when women were finally granted the vote in 1920. On several occasions, she was plagued with lingering illness, but this did not prevent her from advocating and initiating change. The idealistic love for the Indians that she had felt before her arrival was tempered by her insistence on godliness and cleanliness, and by the betrayal settlers felt after the Dakota Conflict of 1862. She came to Minnesota determined to change an unruly frontier settlement, and never relaxed her efforts to influence change through school, church, and community organization.

A hand-written copy remains of a manuscript Harriet Bishop read at the twenty-fifth anniversary of First Baptist Church on December 31, 1874. In it she sums up her own tumultuous life: "The true secret of happiness is to live for the good of the world and the glory of God, making the best of whatever trials betide."

*Norma Sommerdorf was the editor-compiler of A Church in Lowertown: The First Baptist Church of St. Paul 1849-1975, and has been a member of the St. Paul Historic Preservation Commission.*





*Another view of the 1888-89 Wabasha street bridge. Minnesota Historical Society photo. See article starting on page 4.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society  
323 Landmark Center  
75 West Fifth Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION

U.S. Postage  
PAID  
St. Paul, MN  
Permit #3989