

NININGER, A BOOM TOWN OF THE FIFTIES¹

The swift rise of the boom town of Nininger in Dakota County, its brief and hopeful period of prosperity, and its passing into oblivion constitute a chapter in the development of Minnesota interesting to students of both national and local history. Laboring during the fifties, the founders of Nininger reflected the enthusiasm of those who enjoyed the abounding prosperity of the earlier part of that decade but who suffered losses in the crash of values following the panic of 1857. As a type, Nininger resembles the host of mushroom cities that sprang up along the frontier from Lake Superior to the border of the Indian territory. The methods of settlement, the gambling in town lots, the speculation in railroad stocks, the launching of great enterprises with little or no capital, the exaggeration of opportunities, the capitalization of the far distant future, and the basic idealism of the people at Nininger were characteristic of the frontier of the fifties, though in places geographically wide apart the development varied somewhat.

For the student of Minnesota history the story of the rise and fall of Nininger is of interest not only because it is typical of that of many boom towns of territorial days, but also because Ignatius Donnelly first became identified with Minnesota as a founder of Nininger. Of the founders, he alone remained faithful to it. The Donnelly house stood after all other houses had been torn down or removed. The Donnelly family alone remained in the town. After Nininger ceased to exist as a village, Donnelly won fame as a politician, pseudo-scientist, and author.

¹A paper read at the annual luncheon of the Minnesota Historical Society on January 11, 1932. *Ed.*

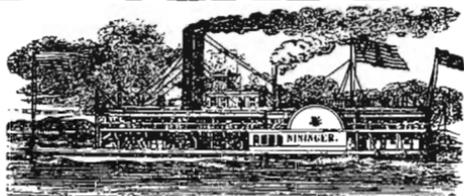
Nininger was located on the south bank of the Mississippi River about twenty-five miles below St. Paul. Hastings, the rival of Nininger, lay five miles farther down the river, but by wagon road the distance between the two towns was only three miles. Nininger boosters never claimed a population of over a thousand, a figure probably larger than the real maximum. The number of well-known people, however, whose lives were touched by this boom town is surprisingly large.

The town site was laid out during the summer of 1856 by John Nininger, a Philadelphia and St. Paul business man interested in real estate. The active sale of land and building operations were begun about October 1, 1856. Nininger interested so many Philadelphia acquaintances in the project that the village was sometimes referred to as a "Philadelphia settlement." He was a brother-in-law of Alexander Ramsey, then ex-governor of Minnesota Territory, and as such he was in a position to gain a wide hearing both in Minnesota and in Pennsylvania.² Nininger was possessed of considerable property when he began the town-site project, and he rapidly acquired a fortune through the sale of lots at fancy prices. Although he was never a resident of Nininger, his name headed every subscription list with a sum as large or larger than any other subscription. Thus for the proposed Mammoth Hotel, Nininger pledged ten thousand dollars, which was one-third of the estimated cost. He was put down for five hundred dollars, nearly a quarter of the cost, on the list of subscribers for a steam ferryboat ordered by Donnelly but never delivered. After the boom the promoter was made the object of considerable criticism by inhabitants of Nininger. The criticism was due chiefly to lawsuits whereby he compelled the forfeiture of lots on which the purchaser had failed to make the improvements required in the deed. Finally he

² J. Fletcher Williams, *History of Dakota County and the City of Hastings*, 439 (Minneapolis, 1881).



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.

A NININGER POSTER

[From the Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 21.]

gave a quitclaim deed to the town of Nininger for all his remaining lots acquired by forfeiture.³ Nininger resided in St. Paul until 1865, when he removed to Alabama to engage in the cotton business. He died in that state.

In the fall of 1856 Ignatius Donnelly was a Philadelphia attorney just twenty-five years of age. He had read law in the office of Benjamin H. Bristow, later attorney-general of the United States. Donnelly's law practice failed to attain more than moderate proportions. The suggestion, therefore, that a fortune and a career awaited him at Nininger City, Minnesota Territory, he received favorably. Donnelly's name appeared as chief editor of the first number of the *Nininger Emigrant Aid Journal*, printed at Philadelphia in English and German on December 1, 1856. Four weeks later, with his family, he arrived at Nininger, and at once became its leading citizen and politician. The first child born in Nininger received the name of Ignatius Donnelly Maley.⁴ Donnelly subscribed five thousand dollars toward the proposed Mammoth Hotel, and five hundred dollars toward the cost of the steam ferry. His idealism manifested itself in his advocacy of a free public reading room, a library, a public school, an atheneum, and a lyceum. Undoubtedly he was sincerely devoted to his vision of the future greatness of Nininger. Because of Donnelly's residence, Nininger possesses today a unique interest, for he became a figure of national importance. In politics he served as lieutenant governor, member of Congress, and leader of many reform and third-party movements. He was often called the "Apostle of Protest." As the author of *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*, of *Atlantis*, and of *Caesar's Column*, works dealing with pseudo-science and political reform, he acquired

³ *Emigrant Aid Journal of Minnesota* (Nininger), February 24, 1858. A file of this paper is in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

⁴ Williams, *Dakota County*, 441.

an international reputation that was further increased by the *Great Cryptogram*, in which he attempted to prove Lord Bacon the author of Shakespeare's plays.

George O. Robertson, a Philadelphian by birth who resided in New York, was the eastern representative of the town-site owners and actively pushed the sale of lots. Robertson seems to have been a typical promoter, bubbling over with enthusiasm, sanguine, and apparently sincere. Every two or three days he addressed a long letter to Donnelly, setting forth some new plan for furthering sales or settlement, and outlining his ideas for the future city. He was the first to use the phrase "Backbone City" with reference to Nininger. Robertson owned a large block of lots and subscribed liberally to proposed improvements—five thousand dollars to the hotel, and five hundred dollars to the steam ferry. In all he is said to have invested forty thousand dollars in this boom town.⁵ He arrived in Nininger with his family just before July 4, 1857, and at once became a leading citizen.

Philip Rohr was a Philadelphia musician of German-American extraction, and was editor of the *Deutsche Musik Zeitung* of that city. His name and that of Donnelly appeared in the first number of the *Emigrant Aid Journal* as its editors. Full of enthusiasm for Minnesota, he planned to settle in Nininger, but he never carried out his plan. Late in December, 1856, he was chosen director of the National Music Festival to be held in Philadelphia the following June. In this fashion Nininger City lost its best musician, but Rohr Avenue remained on the town map. Early in 1859 Rohr removed to St. Paul, where he opened a music studio.⁶

⁵ *Dakota County Tribune* (Farmington), July 15, 1927.

⁶ Rohr to Donnelly, January 26, 1859; circular advertising Rohr's "Academy of Music," Donnelly Papers. The latter was received by Donnelly on February 14, 1859. His papers are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Before A. W. MacDonald became interested in Nininger, he held, after ten years of experience, a position that brought him a salary of fifteen hundred dollars on the staff of the *Scientific American* of New York. Robertson and Donnelly, however, who needed an editor for the *Emigrant Aid Journal*, persuaded the reluctant printer to accept this position. They made an agreement which provided that thirty-five hundred dollars were to be raised for the support of the paper by contributions of a dollar a lot from the owners of the town site. MacDonald was to receive two thousand dollars the first year, personally to own the type and machines, and to be free to earn additional money by job printing. A German printer was to be employed in St. Paul to edit the German portion of the paper. The enterprise must have been a sad disappointment to MacDonald; the citizens of Nininger are said to have raised a thousand dollars for the support of the paper the first year; no German printer was employed and after the first issue no German section was printed.⁷ Only five or six numbers of the paper had appeared when the panic of 1857 occurred.

Other owners of considerable property interests in Nininger were Charles E. Clarke, a real estate dealer from Springfield, Ohio; Louis Faiver, a general storekeeper from Louisville, Ohio; and James R. Case, proprietor of the Eagle sawmill. Major George B. Clitherall of Mobile, Alabama, invested heavily, as did A. J. Jones of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Governor James L. Orr of South Carolina, minister to Russia during the Grant administration. Louis Loichot was postmaster and storekeeper; Hugh Handyside came from Glasgow, Scotland; W. B. and J. B. Reed were prominent contractors; and Dr. Simonton and Dr. Robert Blakeley practiced medicine. A dentist, Dr. William B. Ogden, removed to Nininger

⁷ MacDonald to Donnelly, December 28, 1856, Donnelly Papers; Daniel S. B. Johnston, "Minnesota Journalism in the Territorial Period," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 319.

from Hastings early in 1858. Matthew A. Miller, a civil engineer who was a citizen for two years, removed to Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1859, and later was prominent as an engineer in the Confederate army. Another investor of national reputation was H. B. Hancock, brother of the noted Union general, Winfield S. Hancock.⁸

Most of the land on which Nininger was built belonged early in 1856 to Henry Caleff, and smaller portions were drawn from the farms of John Bassett and E. D. Stone. By that time the land had been under cultivation for some four years. The earliest resident of the vicinity had been Louis Belanger, a French-Canadian who lived with an Indian wife on Belanger's Island and cut wood for the river steamers as early as 1847 or 1848.⁹ Previous to that time he had worked as a voyageur for the American Fur Company.

The new city of Nininger, which was surveyed by C. L. Emerson of St. Paul in 1856, appeared at once with about thirty-eight hundred lots. Including the cost of the survey, these lots represented an investment of six dollars each. Four additions were soon added to the city. Smith, Hancock, and Thomas' addition bore the date of August, 1856. In January, 1857, Nininger laid out an addition to his original plat. The following July, Miller surveyed the Donnelly, Case, Burns, and Goldsmith addition. The last addition was made by Joseph C. Kerr and Stone in March, 1858.¹⁰

The technique of real estate booming is more or less familiar to most Americans. The most recent land boom in Minnesota ended in the collapse of values during the

⁸ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, January 20, 1858; Williams, *Dakota County*, 440, 444.

⁹ Williams, *Dakota County*, 438.

¹⁰ *Statement of the Basis of the Organization of the City of Nininger*, 6 (Philadelphia, 1856); *Emigrant Aid Journal*, December 1, 1856; Williams, *Dakota County*, 440.

summer of 1920. Similar characteristics marked the town-site booms in Minnesota during the fifties and sixties. "Get-rich-quick" schemes were not the invention of Minnesota pioneers, but were taken fully developed from older states. The boom of Nininger City began with a rapid advance in the price of lots. By December 1, 1856, lots cost \$100 each. Later some were sold to outsiders for from \$200 to \$250 each, though among themselves the speculators seem never to have paid over \$100 a lot. On January 24, 1857, when Ignatius Donnelly formed a partnership in the land business with John Nininger, he bought of the latter 101 lots for \$2,800, an average of \$27.70. On March 11, 1857, John Nininger sold seventeen lots to P. I. Fish of East Brooklyn, New York, for \$2,533. In all Donnelly purchased about a thousand acres, including, of course, farm land adjacent to Nininger.¹¹ Much of it he soon resold to other speculators, but much he retained permanently. Clarke wrote to Donnelly at Philadelphia late in the fall of 1856 to say that Nininger and Case were inclined to advance the price of lots too fast, thereby retarding the growth of the town and giving currency to the charge that the town was merely a lot-selling scheme. For most of the lots that Nininger sold, he included a clause in the deed requiring that improvements valued at a minimum of a hundred dollars per lot be started within six months and completed within two years after the sale. The maximum price asked for river frontage was five hundred dollars a lot. For such lots the cost of the improvements demanded was correspondingly large. In all, the owners of Nininger lots obligated themselves to make improvements to the minimum value of three hundred and

¹¹ Articles of copartnership between Nininger and Donnelly, January 1, 1857; memorandum, January 24, 1857; Nininger to Donnelly, March 11, 1857, Donnelly Papers; John D. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:81 (June-September, 1921).

eighty thousand dollars within two years.¹² No doubt concerning the certainty of the expenditure of this great sum appeared to exist.

The town-site boomers advertised extensively in the newspapers, held mass meetings, solicited funds from men of means, and distributed letters, circulars, and pamphlets. Finally, the *Emigrant Aid Journal* was established to serve chiefly as a propaganda sheet for the promoters. It was therefore not only independent in politics, but it rarely mentioned the many stirring political events of the day. This paper was placed in the reading rooms of many Atlantic steamers. Donnelly preserved in his scrapbook advertisements of Nininger clipped from no less than twenty-three widely scattered newspapers.

Small cards, printed by the thousands, describing the advantages of Minnesota and of Nininger were distributed through the mail. Hundreds were placed in barber shops and hotels. The response was considerable. The principal owners of the town site received letters from nearly all the states of the East and of the Ohio Valley and a few from eastern Canada and from the South. Each purchaser of town lots was urged to interest friends and neighbors. The purchasers were easily persuaded to advertise the region because they were speculators as well as intended settlers. Carefully arranged mass meetings were addressed if possible by someone recently returned from Minnesota. Rohr called such a meeting in Philadelphia. Robertson and MacDonald held several in New York. Those who attended an assembly in Broadway House on March 27, 1857, listened to a brilliant address by Donnelly, which was later published in pamphlet form.¹³

¹² *Organization of the City of Nininger*, 7.

¹³ The pamphlet bears the title, *Minnesota, Address Delivered at the Broadway House, New York* (New York, 1857). This and another pamphlet by Donnelly, entitled *Nininger City* (Philadelphia, 1856), were used to promote settlement.

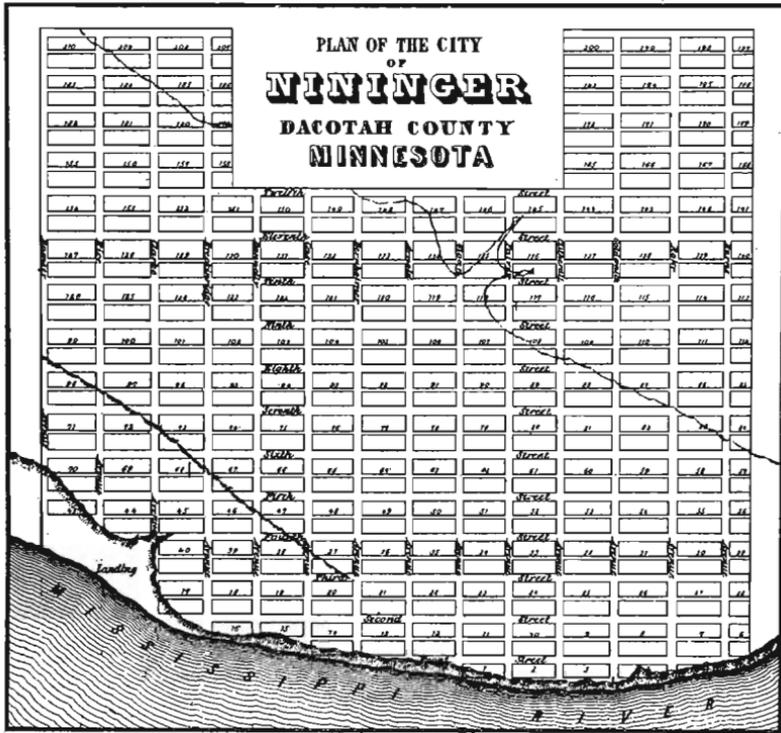
Often general information about Minnesota was cleverly used as an argument for buying town lots in Nininger. It was repeatedly stated that Minnesota possessed a healthful climate, which was a certain cure for consumption, and that fever and ague were unknown in the territory. Elk, deer, buffalo, ducks, and prairie chickens were abundant, and forty-two pigeons, it was reported, were known to have fallen at one discharge of a shotgun. Great emphasis was laid on the preëmption law, which was published week after week in the *Emigrant Aid Journal*.

Another method for promoting the settlement of the new town was that used by the Minnesota Emigrant Aid Association, planned by Donnelly in the fall of 1856. For twenty-five dollars payable in one-dollar installments, the prospective emigrant could purchase a membership in this society. In return he was promised a free ticket to Nininger, free maintenance for a year, and certain unspecified farm implements. Since the actual cost of a third-class emigrant ticket from New York to Nininger was \$16.05 and that of a first-class ticket was \$34.25, the Minnesota Emigrant Aid Association could scarcely have continued for long as a solvent institution. It applied for a charter from the territorial legislature early in 1857. Among the prominent men whose cooperation was desired were Stephen A. Douglas, John C. Breckenridge, General Sylvanus B. Lowry of St. Cloud, Alexander Ramsey, Edmund Rice, and Henry M. Rice.¹⁴

In the late fifties Minnesota regarded Kansas much as Florida now regards California. Minnesota and Kansas were keen rivals for the westward moving streams of emigration. Critical allusions to Kansas, especially with reference to the hot and feverish climate in that territory, appeared frequently in the Minnesota press. Minnesota

¹⁴A draft of the charter proposed for the Emigrant Aid Association, dated January 28, 1857, is in the Donnelly Papers. See also *Emigrant Aid Journal*, December 1, 1856.

boosters viewed with alarm the pacification of Kansas. MacDonald, in an editorial in the *Emigrant Aid Journal*, summed up the four causes for the decrease in the number



[From Donnelly, *Nininger City* (1856).]

of emigrant arrivals in Minnesota during the spring of 1857. They were peace in Kansas; the hard winter followed by a late opening of the river; the Indian scare; and the financial crisis, precipitated by the failure of the Ohio Life and Trust Company of New York and Cincinnati.¹⁵

Robertson did not overlook northern Europe as a possible source of citizens for Nininger. He negotiated an

¹⁵ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, August 29, 1857.

agreement with Handyside and Henderson, a company operating a line of steamers from Glasgow to Montreal and New York. It was believed that, as a result of this agreement, many Scotch and English emigrants would settle near Nininger. As a matter of fact, Hugh Handyside, younger brother of the head of the steamship company, went to Nininger. Even the panic of 1857 did not bring the Nininger advertising campaign entirely to an end. In Donnelly's scrapbook is a handbill entitled, "Cure for the Panic. Emigrate to Minnesota! Where no Banks exist."¹⁶

The pioneers of the fifties approached the immense labor of building a new city with confidence and enthusiasm. At Nininger trees had to be cut, streets laid out, the levee improved, and stores, schools, churches, and homes constructed. Means of transportation, involving roads and bridges, a ferry, steamboats, and a railroad must be provided. The spirit of the pioneers of Nininger City can best be illustrated by the quotation which Donnelly placed in the heading of the first issue of the *Emigrant Aid Journal*. "'Dost thou know how to play the fiddle?' 'No,' answered Themistocles, 'But I understand the art of raising a little village into a great city.'" MacDonalld in the second number of this newspaper asserted half in fun that Nininger City would eventually exceed New York City in population. Characteristic of the men of Nininger was their faith in the future of their city. For this faith much justification existed. Minnesota was just taking form; counties, cities, and villages were in a constant state of flux. All knew that great cities were being born, but as yet no person could with certainty predict the future of any location. Some town sites possessed unique natural advantages, but most of them depended for success on the courage, liberality, and aggressiveness of their first citizens. To the men of Nininger, during the early summer of 1857,

¹⁶Robertson to Donnelly, March 21, 1857, Donnelly Papers; Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 46.

the greatness of their city was already at hand. Donnelly said, "Here I am, but twenty-six years old, and I have already acquired a large fortune. What shall I do to occupy myself the rest of my life?"¹⁷

Early in 1857 the steamboat companies were selling tickets to Hastings, but not to Nininger. Here was no small problem. The companies had to be informed of the existence of the new town, induced to sell tickets to that place, and persuaded to call regularly. Since some captains objected to landing at Nininger, this problem continued without solution until 1858, when plans were made to extend the levee.¹⁸ Nininger early became a post office, but all mail was delivered at Hastings. The postmaster, Louis Loichot, was compelled to go for it in person once or twice a week, though the post road passed within a mile of Nininger. Here was another problem. The post office department was informed of the situation and at length was persuaded to relieve the people of Nininger.¹⁹

An attempt was made to obtain a special charter for the city of Nininger in the legislature during the spring of 1857, but it failed chiefly because of the chaos following the passage of the bill to remove the capital from St. Paul to St. Peter. This failure left the community in a difficult situation because no money could be raised by taxation for the numerous improvements necessary to its growth. Early in July an attempt was made to organize the Nininger Real Estate Association, an organization that would levy voluntary taxes, but difficulties arose and the plan failed. The territorial legislature, however, on February 10, 1858, passed an act to incorporate Nininger as a town

¹⁷ Hicks, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 8:81. Donnelly preserved, labelled, and filed all letters, clippings, and advertisements concerning Nininger, believing that they would some day prove of great historic value.

¹⁸ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, May 5, 1858.

¹⁹ Copy of a letter of Donnelly to James Campbell, postmaster-general of the United States, January 26, 1857, Donnelly Papers.

rather than as a city. On February 24 an election was held to choose the new municipal officers.²⁰ Donnelly was elected president of the town council by a vote of 113 to 3. The other members chosen were Charles Clarke, George O. Robertson, Henry Caleff, and S. S. Eaton. The council proceeded to pass ordinances and to order improvements. It issued scrip, which the merchants of Nininger accepted; provided a hog pound; since stray hogs were the chief mischief-makers in the community; employed a marshal and a treasurer; let the contract for a city well; laid out four fire wards; and ordered that trees hiding the town from the sight of passengers on river steamers be cut down. The proceedings of the council were ordered printed. Thus Nininger was started at last on its brief career.

At the time that the village organization failed, the affairs of the school district also became involved. On July 27, 1857, the *Emigrant Aid Journal* announced the organization of a separate school district for Nininger. Miss Mary Prescott was employed as teacher, and school was called for Monday, September 28, 1857. The county commissioners of Dakota County ruled the new district illegal, however, because the petition for its formation had too few signatures. School did not open. Two young women, Miss E. H. Strickland and Miss J. L. Matherson, later organized "select" schools, which were supported by tuition fees. The Nininger school district number 44 was finally organized in 1858 and Miss Matherson was engaged as the first public school teacher. The first school trustees were A. C. Poor, A. Reed, and George H. Mowry, and J. H. Owen was clerk. Though Miss Matherson taught the first public school, she was not the first teacher. The first teacher in Nininger City was Warren Carle, who taught in the rear room of the Handyside House during 1856. Other private teachers were a Miss Tinkham in

²⁰ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, July 4, 1857; February 17, 1858; Minnesota, *Special Laws*, 1858, p. 370-376.

1856; C. Cressy, who taught during the winter and spring of 1858; and a Mr. Palmer, who taught a writing school at the same time.²¹

The ambitious founders of Nininger hoped for the county seat of Dakota County, which was located at the old trading post of Mendota. Clarke wrote to Donnelly under date of October 22, 1856, that Nininger had no chance for the county seat. The best plan, therefore, was to try to keep it at Mendota until Nininger had grown to a position where it could compete with other towns in the county for the seat of government. Upon his arrival in Minnesota, Donnelly did what he could to influence the legislature, but the county seat election could not be postponed. It was held March 24, 1857. Hastings won with 1,071 votes to 859 votes cast for West St. Paul, 416 for Empire City, 11 for Mendota, and 259 votes thrown out.²²

The territorial legislature of 1857 chartered the Nininger, St. Peter and Western Railroad Company. No land grant or other form of assistance went with the charter. Railroad stock was announced for sale beginning the first Monday in July. To expedite the sale of stock, a new town site, Louisville, was laid out in Carver County. Here lots were said to be worth a thousand dollars each. The purchase of a thousand-dollar share of stock in the new railroad gave the purchaser the right to buy a town lot in Louisville for only ten dollars.²³

Nininger claimed five hundred people during the summer of 1857. In 1858 the population was stated to be a thousand. According to the eighth census taken in 1860, the population was 257 men and 212 women, a total of 469. By this time the decline had set in. The greatest population seems to have been well over five hundred but

²¹ Williams, *Dakota County*, 439, 442; *Emigrant Aid Journal*, January 20, 1858.

²² *Minnesotian* (St. Paul), March 24, 1857.

²³ Minnesota, *Laws*, 1857, p. 18-25; circular in Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 44.

less than a thousand. In February, 1858, 116 votes were cast in an election. In the fall election of 1858, two hundred votes were cast.²⁴ The *Emigrant Aid Journal* for July 4, 1857, stated that a hundred houses had been built in eight months and that some twenty buildings were under construction. The issue for August 1 listed thirty-one new buildings. Four sawmills and the seminary of L. N. Countryman were merely projected and never were built. Nininger was still growing during 1858. Before the end of March work was begun on fourteen new buildings. When Nininger was at its height it boasted two sawmills, a grist mill, a plow factory, a sash and door factory, six saloons, three hotels, eight general stores, a physician, a dentist, a private banker, and several real estate offices. From March 20 to April 13, 1858, fourteen steamboats arrived at the levee. In March of the same year Leander Wells began the construction of a ferryboat.²⁵

The largest residence in Nininger was the Donnelly house. This house measured thirty-four and a half by thirty-nine feet, was two stories high, and was constructed at a cost of eight thousand dollars. The plan shows a central hall with a library and an office on one side and a parlor, fourteen by thirty-nine feet, on the other. The kitchen and dining room were in an addition at the rear, which was sixteen by forty-two and a half feet. On the second floor of the house were five bedrooms and on the roof an "observatory."²⁶

The social centers of Nininger were Tremont Hall, which had a dance floor sixty feet long; and Good Templars Hall, a two-story building twenty feet wide and thirty-six feet

²⁴ *Dakota County Tribune*, July 15, 1927; W. H. Mitchell, *Dakota County, Its Past and Present*, 83 (Minneapolis, 1868).

²⁵ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, March 17, 31, April 14, 1858; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties*, 328 (Chicago, 1910).

²⁶ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, August 15, 1857. The plan for the house is in the Donnelly Papers for January, 1857.

long. Both buildings were erected during the spring of 1858. The town purchased for two hundred dollars the latter hall, which was used as the first public school. During April, 1857, the Nininger post office received 689 letters, during March, 999, and during May, 1,117.²⁷

The chief rival of Nininger was the older and larger city of Hastings. In the spring of 1858 when the Nininger free school opened with one teacher, Hastings had three teachers. The following spring the Baptists opened Minnesota Central University at Hastings, with two teachers and a curriculum including Latin, Greek, French, German, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and surveying.²⁸ Occasional references may be found to the active nature of the rivalry between the two towns, which was clearly a by-product of the enthusiasm of the times. In December, 1857, certain merchants of Hastings staged a home talent play, in which the chief incident was a wreck on the Nininger, St. Peter and Western Railroad. MacDonald was relieved to learn that Columbus Stebbins, editor of the *Hastings Independent*, did not approve of such insults to a neighboring city. The *St. Paul Times* comments on the anger of Hastings residents because citizens of Nininger had built a bridge over the Vermillion River, thereby diverting some trade to Nininger. The newspapers of Nininger and Hastings show a surprisingly small amount of open rivalry. Nininger never contended actively with Hastings for the county seat. Every number of the *Emigrant Aid Journal* carried advertisements of Hastings merchants, but Nininger merchants did not advertise in the Hastings paper. This indicates that Nininger was a part of the Hastings territory. Among the few references to Nininger in the Hastings newspaper is a eulogistic report of a lecture delivered there by Donnelly.

²⁷ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, July 18, 1857; Williams, *Dakota County*, 442.

²⁸ Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 48.

When Donnelly was elected lieutenant governor of Minnesota in 1859, he not only received the unanimous support of the citizens of Nininger but also many of the votes in Hastings and Dakota County.²⁹

The founders of Nininger City were bent upon establishing a well-rounded community with an intellectual and social life of its own. Especially during the long winter months, when the river was frozen, the Minnesota cities of the fifties were isolated. People were therefore forced to depend upon their own resources for amusement and for intellectual growth. These resources were abundant, for many of the pioneers were men and women of culture and refinement. Democracy and urbanity characterized the social life of the ambitious western cities.

The first Fourth of July in Nininger City could not fail to be a grand occasion. The steamer "Wm. S. Nelson," Captain Hillhouse, "black with people" coming for the most part from Minneapolis and St. Anthony, arrived at 3:00 P.M. A cannon in the bow fired salute after salute and unfortunately exploded, blowing off the mate's hand. A sum of two thousand dollars was collected among the passengers for the injured man, for money was plentiful before the panic and the pioneers were generous. The program, already delayed four hours on account of the late arrival of the steamer, began at once. David G. Barnitz acted as chairman; George H. Burns, private banker, read the Declaration of Independence; and Donnelly, whose oratory would have been creditable before any audience in any city of the land, delivered a stirring address. A dinner was served by the proprietor of the Handyside House in an outdoor arbor. This was followed by a program of seventeen toasts. Robertson was toastmaster, and the toasts and speakers included: "The Day We Celebrate," by Major Clitherall; "The President of the United States,"

²⁹ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, August 29, 1857; *Hastings Independent*, February 10, 1859; Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 52.

by Nininger; "Minnesota," by Robertson; "Our Town," by Donnelly; "Our Sister City, Hastings," by Dr. Foster of Hastings; "The Nininger and St. Peter Western Railroad," by Miller; "The Press," by MacDonald; "Our Foreign Immigration," by Handyside; "The Great Yankee Nation," by W. B. Reed; "Pioneers of Minnesota," by Caleff; "The Ladies, God Bless Them," by George H. Burns; and "Our Host and Our Dinner," by Barnitz.³⁰

It seems probable that the wines listed on the bill of fare were not neglected, for before the end of the day a fight occurred between some Minneapolis visitors and certain residents of Nininger. It occasioned an acrimonious controversy between the papers of the two towns. It further developed that the editor of the Minneapolis paper, having been "indiscreet," had to be put to bed. Thus with good fellowship, the enjoyment of abundance, and a feeling of certainty concerning the future wealth and prosperity of their community, the men of Nininger celebrated the eighty-first birthday of the nation.

The atheneum so greatly desired by Donnelly seems never to have become a reality. Among the Donnelly Papers are numerous undelivered stock certificates of the atheneum valued at twenty-five dollars each. The panic of 1857 rendered them unsalable.³¹ The literary association building never was built. The two gifted young ladies of New York whom Robertson attempted to attract to the West to teach fancy work, French, and music in a proposed Nininger seminary never came. The lyceum therefore became the chief intellectual institution during the winters of 1857 and 1858. One of the leaders of this organization was Warren Carle, who the year before had taught the first school in Nininger Township. He later married Miss Matherson.³² The officers chosen at the first meeting were

³⁰ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, July 18, 1857.

³¹ The stock certificates are in the Donnelly Papers for February, 1857.

³² *Dakota County Tribune*, July 15, 1927.

Matthew A. Miller, president; Hugh Handyside, vice president; Albert Poor, treasurer; and David Phillips, secretary. The lyceum presented literary programs, which always included a debate and either a declamation or an essay. Some of the questions of debate were: "Does the pulpit wield more power than the press?"; "Is England justified in the present war on India?"; "Shall the fugitive slave law be respected and obeyed?"; "Is the Doctrine of Popular Sovereignty in its extreme bearing tenable?"; "Does reason or revelation teach that man is possessed of an immortal soul?"; "Has the legislature power to prohibit the sale and manufacturing of spirituous liquors intended as a beverage?" A junior organization, known as the Nininger Boys Lyceum, was established. This society debated, "Does Washington deserve more praise than Bonaparte?" and "Has Hastings grown more than Nininger during the past year?" It is hardly necessary to add that the debaters decided that Nininger was in the lead.³³

On September 26, 1857, Donnelly called a meeting to organize the Nininger Reading Room Society. The Dakota County Agricultural Society became active and influential. In November, 1857, the Reverend Dr. Quigley, a temperance lecturer, arrived. He left behind him an organization known as the Guards of Temperance. In October, 1857, the people of Nininger listened to a concert by a member of the famous Hutchinson family. Nininger was contributing to the intellectual life of the territory chiefly through its gifted orator, Donnelly. On February 13, 1858, at the age of twenty-six he addressed the legislature on the subject of encouraging immigration. In 1859 Minnesota made him lieutenant governor, General Sylvanus B. Lowry of St. Cloud being the defeated candidate. The vote stood 20,917 to 17,670.³⁴

³³ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, December 19, 1857; January 2, 13, 20, 27, February 3, 10, 17, 24, March 3, 10, 17, 24, 1858.

³⁴ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, November 7, 1857; Donnelly Scrapbook, p. 52.

Minnesota pioneers liked to dance. In Nininger City dancing parties were given once a week in Tremont Hall. The great social event of the winter seems to have been the New Year's ball. Thirty men formed the committee on arrangements. Tickets cost \$3.00. Dinner was served at the Handyside House. Nininger pioneers also enjoyed baseball. A baseball club was organized on August 15, 1857, with Burns as president and Charles Ledie as secretary.

The inhabitants of Nininger were convinced of the need of churches in their community. Robertson was interested in bringing the Presbyterian denomination to Nininger, and he subscribed two hundred dollars toward a church building. On December 21, 1856, Faiver wrote from Louisville, Ohio, that he desired to subscribe a similar amount. Church buildings, however, did not materialize because of the panic and attendant hard times. The Baptists also collected considerable money for a building, but it was never constructed. During 1857 and 1858 church organizations were perfected. Each Sunday one or more services were conducted by ministers who usually came from Hastings and preached in private houses or in halls. Tremont Hall was opened each week to a Sunday school. Four or five denominations were more or less active in Nininger. The Reverend T. Pugh, a Methodist Episcopal minister; the Reverend E. W. Cressy of the Presbyterian church; the Reverend T. Wilcoxson, an Episcopalian; the Reverend J. B. Hilton, a Congregationalist and the only minister who ever resided in Nininger; and the Reverend Mr. Kidder were among the clergymen who preached in Nininger.³⁵ During 1857 the Reverend Mr. Cressy addressed the Presbyterians in Tremont Hall on Sunday mornings, while the Reverend Mr. Pugh gathered the Methodists at the same place in the afternoon.

³⁵ Williams, *Dakota County*, 439, 441; *Emigrant Aid Journal*, May 5, 1858; *Dakota County Tribune*, July 15, 1927.

The dream of immediate riches on a large scale passed away with the panic in August, 1857. The men of Nininger nevertheless lived on through the winter enjoying a modest abundance. Work existed for all and trade continued vigorously. The editor of the *Emigrant Aid Journal* has recorded the prices of a number of articles as they were on February 3, 1858: flour cost two dollars a sack; buckwheat flour, two dollars per hundred pounds; butter, thirty cents a pound; cheese, fifteen cents a pound; potatoes, sixty cents a bushel; molasses, a dollar a gallon; beans, two dollars a bushel; pork, twelve and a half cents a pound; and ham, seventeen cents a pound. Nails were priced at five dollars a keg; lime was a dollar per hundred pounds; lumber, sixteen dollars a thousand feet; and wood, from three to four dollars a cord. Hay sold at from six to eight dollars per ton, and oats and corn each were fifty cents a bushel. Passenger pigeons were so abundant that the *Emigrant Aid Journal* published recipes for preserving them.³⁶ There was no distress in Nininger such as existed in many eastern cities.

Nevertheless, Nininger failed and disappeared as a result of the panic, which stopped the sale of lots and impoverished the citizens before the community was well under way. Donnelly was especially hard hit. His correspondence during the two years following 1857 deals largely with debts and threatened suits. The requirement that all purchasers of lots improve them to the extent of from a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars within two years and a half after their sale might have produced results if the panic had not taken place until 1860. As it was, many purchasers forfeited their lots and went away in disgust. In addition, Nininger was too close to Hastings. It therefore lacked an adequate surrounding area. Nininger Township included only seventeen square miles. Nininger, moreover, was a river town, and it failed to secure a railroad. As far

³⁶ *Emigrant Aid Journal*, September 12, 1857.

as can be ascertained, no stock in the Nininger, St. Peter and Western Railroad ever was sold.

A few of the downward steps in the history of Nininger may be chronicled. The panic of 1857 made impossible the construction of the Mammoth Hotel, which was to have cost thirty thousand dollars. It also put an end to Countryman's seminary. Countryman became a farmer, was chosen recording secretary of the Dakota County Agricultural Society, and continued to contribute articles to the *Emigrant Aid Journal*. In June Donnelly mailed to a manufacturer of steam ferryboats a check for five hundred dollars as down payment on a new ferryboat. At the time Robertson believed that two boats should be ordered in place of one. In September the manufacturer wrote that the boat was ready for delivery and that it would be sold if not called for. This letter, which is among the Donnelly Papers, is marked "Unanswered." There was no money to pay for the boat.

The Blakeley and Lewis steam sawmill, built in 1856, was torn down in 1862; the Eaton flour mill, built in 1858, burned within three years and was not rebuilt; the Eagle sawmill, built by Case in 1857, was closed about three years later, and the machinery was sold.³⁷ MacDonald did not remain long in Nininger. The subsidy of a thousand dollars a year from the town-site owners ceased at the end of two years. Shortly thereafter the *Emigrant Aid Journal* was discontinued. In April, 1859, the *Dakota Sentinel* began publication in Nininger under the management of Lindergreen and Habbitt. It was Republican and antislavery in its politics and was devoted to the political fortunes of Donnelly. The paper, however, had a short life, Lindergreen soon entering the Union army.³⁸ The Handyside House kept by W. S. Gibson and accommodating fifty

³⁷ *Dakota County Tribune*, July 15, 1927.

³⁸ *Dakota County Tribune*, July 15, 1927; Julian J. Kendall to Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly, August 3, 1861, Donnelly Papers.

guests, was removed to Hastings. The same fate awaited the Clinton House, which was built in 1858. The Masonic Lodge of Cottage Grove purchased Tremont Hall for a lodge room and removed it to that place.³⁹ During the sixties the original Donnelly house was removed to Hastings. It was soon replaced by the present house. By 1869 no other buildings remained; the village had disappeared. Gradually much of the original plat was vacated. The map of Dakota County still shows on the plat over a thousand lots not vacated.⁴⁰ The Donnelly house remains, a place that should be preserved as an object of historic interest.

DUDLEY S. BRAINARD

STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE
ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA

³⁹ Williams, *Dakota County*, 440.

⁴⁰ *Plat Book, Map Plates of Dakota County, Minnesota*, 35 (St. Paul, 1928).



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).