

HENRY HASTINGS SIBLEY AND THE MINNESOTA FRONTIER¹

If the West be thought of as a period rather than a place then the study of a limited area which passed through the successive stages in the evolution of society on the frontier will be typical of what was repeated over and over again in the conquest and settlement of the continent. And, in the same way, if a study be made of an individual who lived through and participated in or at least witnessed the various steps, vivid illustrations of the significant features of the westward movement may be found. In the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century these conditions were present in that part of the upper Mississippi Valley which became Minnesota and in the life of Henry Hastings Sibley, fur-trader, first delegate to Congress from Minnesota Territory, and first governor of the state of Minnesota.

The Sibley family furnishes a good illustration of the migration of the New England element.² The story of this family takes its beginning in old England back almost, if not quite, to the time of the Norman Conquest.³ The Puritan emigration during the period of the personal rule of Charles I brought the first Sibleys to the shores of New England, to what may be called the first American West.⁴ There, in the second generation, some of the family helped to settle one of the several new towns then being formed on the Indian frontier, and in the

¹ Read at the twelfth annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, St. Louis, May 8, 1919.

² See Lois K. Mathews, *The Expansion of New England* (Boston, 1909).

³ William A. Benedict and Hiram A. Tracy, *History of the Town of Sutton, Massachusetts, from 1704 to 1876*, 718 (Worcester, 1878); Nathaniel West, *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley, LL. D.*, 1-17 (St. Paul, 1889).

⁴ "The oldest West was the Atlantic coast." Frederick J. Turner, "The Old West," in Wisconsin Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 1908, p. 184.

process they began to take on some of the characteristics of frontiersmen. For three generations the branch under consideration was identified with the town of Sutton, Massachusetts. Finally in 1795, Solomon Sibley, a young lawyer, began a journey along the trail that led to the first real American West, the region beyond the Alleghanies, going first to Marietta and then to Detroit.⁵ This paper will follow the fortunes of a younger son of that Solomon Sibley, from his boyhood in Detroit through his life in the Indian country of the upper Mississippi, where he saw the change from the fur-traders' frontier to territorial days and thence to statehood, an evolution typical in the advance of the frontier across the continent. Three times did members of this family migrate to a newer American West and live through this evolution of society. Sometimes the early settlers in the wilderness formed the habit of drifting along with the frontier; but the more ambitious of the pioneers, of whom Sibley is an example, went farther west in order to get a start in life and then waited for later waves of civilization to overtake them.⁶

Henry Hastings Sibley was born in Detroit, Michigan, February 20, 1811. He was educated in the schools of Detroit and had two years instruction in Greek and Latin under an Episcopalian clergyman. His parents intended that he should be a lawyer, and he studied law for two years. But the prospects of a legal career did not appeal to a young man in whose veins coursed the blood of several generations of pioneers.⁷

⁵ Solomon Sibley was the first settler to go to Detroit after the evacuation of that post by the British in 1796 as provided for in the Jay treaty. *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 6: 488; Mathews, *Expansion of New England*, 230.

⁶ A good description of the waves of civilization may be found in John M. Peck, *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West* (Boston, 1836).

⁷ On his father's side Sibley's ancestry can be traced without break to John Sibley who came to Salem, Massachusetts, possibly in 1629, certainly by 1634. His mother was Sarah Whipple Sproat, daughter of Colonel Ebenezer Sproat, a surveyor who worked on the "seven ranges" in 1786 and helped in the surveys at Marietta. Colonel Sproat's wife was Catherine Whipple, a daughter of Commodore Whipple, who was

Accordingly, with the consent of his parents, he gave up his legal studies and, after a time, secured a clerkship with the American Fur Company at Mackinac, a position which he held for four years. The fur company was anxious to secure young men of ability and promise and rapidly advanced those who made good. Such a man was Sibley.

In 1834 the American Fur Company was reorganized. John Jacob Astor retired and Ramsay Crooks became president of the new company which retained the old name. At this time Sibley found himself at a turning point in his career. He received an offer of a position as cashier of a bank in Detroit and a similar offer from a bank in Huron and had almost decided to accept one of them when the way was opened for him to become a partner in the fur company. As a clerk at Mackinac he had become acquainted with the traders who annually reported with their furs at the company headquarters. Two of these traders, Hercules L. Dousman and Joseph Rolette Sr., had been engaged in the fur trade for many years with headquarters at Prairie du Chien. They now proposed to Sibley that he join them in making an agreement with the American Fur Company by which the company would advance the goods and the men give their time in extending operations on the upper Mississippi among the Sioux. According to their plan, Sibley would establish new headquarters on the St. Peter's River and have charge of all the operations in that vicinity. The two friends pictured the wild life on the frontier in such glowing terms that Sibley was influenced to decline the bank offers and to link his fortunes with the Indian country destined to be Minnesota.⁸

descended from John Whipple, one of the original proprietors of Providence Plantations and an associate of Roger Williams. Samuel P. Hildreth, *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of the Early Pioneer Settlers of Ohio*, 159-162, 230-237 (Cincinnati, 1852); Benedict and Tracy, *Sutton*, 718; West, *Sibley*, 47.

⁸ Sibley, "Memoir of Hercules L. Dousman," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:192-194.

The partnership was accordingly formed and on October 28, 1834, Sibley arrived at Mendota, across the St. Peter's River from Fort Snelling.⁹ Two years afterward he built the stone house which was his residence until 1862 when he moved to St. Paul. The land on which it was located was not opened for settlement for many years, in fact, not until the time when he was delegate to Congress from Minnesota Territory. During all these years, therefore, he was a squatter on the public domain. Concerning his residence here in different political jurisdictions, Sibley wrote some time later: "It may seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true, that I was successively a citizen of Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota Territories, without changing my residence at Mendota."¹⁰ In the short period of fourteen years four territories had exercised nominal jurisdiction over the site, and from 1846 to 1848 the region west of the Mississippi in which Mendota is located had been without territorial organization. Rapid changes of this sort were one of the significant features of the westward movement.

The fur trade in Minnesota was in its most flourishing condition immediately preceding 1837. That year, however, marks the turning point in its history.¹¹ Up to that time all the lands within the limits of the future Minnesota Territory, except the military reservation at Fort Snelling, belonged to the Indians, but in 1837 a delegation of Sioux chiefs was taken to Washington and a treaty was negotiated with them for the

⁹ Sibley to Ramsay Crooks, November 1, 1834, Sibley Papers. These papers, which are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, are especially valuable for studies of the fur trade in Minnesota and of territorial politics from 1848 to 1853.

¹⁰ Sibley, "Reminiscences of the Early Days of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:265.

¹¹ Ramsay Crooks to Sibley, April 27, 1836, Sibley Papers. A comparison of the prices and amounts of fur collected as given in the Sibley Papers and in the books of the American Fur Company for the years before and after 1837 shows that that year was the turning point in the history of the fur trade.

cession of certain lands east of the Mississippi.¹² This treaty was made primarily to open up the pine forests of the St. Croix Valley to pioneer lumbermen, the advance guard of the second wave of civilization, and it was thereby an indication that the fur-traders' frontier would soon pass away.

After the steady advance of the white settlers made necessary the negotiation of treaties for the cession of land, the Indians underwent a marked transformation. They came to rely more upon annuities from the government and less upon the collection of furs. This fact, together with the growing scarcity of fur-bearing animals in the region, brought about a decline in the fur trade. This does not mean, however, that the total amount of trade carried on with the Indians necessarily decreased. After the government began to pay the annuities, the Indians could pay for part of their goods in cash, and so the fur company began a retail business. With the appearance of white men other than traders this business was naturally extended to them. As white settlement increased still more the fur company undertook banking operations, making loans, cashing drafts brought in by settlers, and selling exchange on the New York office to those who wished to send money out of the region.¹³ This transformation of a fur-trading enterprise into a general mercantile and financial establishment is typical of the evolution of institutions in a frontier community.

The second wave of civilization to come up the Mississippi made its appearance in Minnesota in the last years of the decade of the thirties. Although the treaty with the Indians

¹² United States, *Statutes at Large*, 7: 538. A map showing the cessions of land in Minnesota in the different Indian treaties may be found in William W. Folwell, *Minnesota, the North Star State*, frontispiece (Boston, 1908). See also Charles C. Royce (comp.), *Indian Land Cessions in the United States*, 766 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, part 2—Washington, 1899).

¹³ Sydney A. Patchin, "The Development of Banking in Minnesota," in *MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN*, 2: 115-119 (August, 1917).

was made in 1837, the lands were not surveyed and sold for many years. The early lumbermen, as well as the pioneer farmers and even town promoters, were, therefore, squatters upon the public domain, the latter classes relying upon their land claim associations to secure their title. The first regular "outfit" of lumbermen was established in 1837 by John Boyce at the mouth of the Kånabec or Snake River.¹⁴ In the same year Sibley, with two partners, made a contract with the St. Croix and Sauk River bands of the Chippewa by which they secured permission to cut pine for a period of ten years. The Indians agreed not to molest the contractors or their lumbermen and also not to permit anyone else to cut timber in the region. In return for these concessions, the contractors agreed to furnish to the Indians a specified amount of goods, including gunpowder, lead, scalping knives, and tobacco, every year during the period of the contract.¹⁵ Once a beginning had been made, other lumbermen came into the region, sawmills were established, and lumbering towns appeared.

The lumbering industry was partly responsible for the coming of the next class of white settlers, the pioneer farmers. In the period of beginnings, the lumbermen secured their provisions and supplies from the settlements down the Mississippi. It was not long, however, before some of the settlers recognized that Minnesota might have agricultural possibilities and that farmers would find a ready market for their surplus products among the lumbermen. The census of 1840 stated that St. Croix County, Wisconsin Territory, which included the region between the St. Croix and the Mississippi together with a part of the present state of Wisconsin, produced 8,014 bushels of potatoes and 606 bushels of corn. Agriculture did not exist as an independent occupation, however, until between 1840 and

¹⁴ Edward W. Durant, "Lumbering and Steamboating on the St. Croix River," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 10: 648 (part 2).

¹⁵ This contract, dated March 13, 1837, was signed by forty-seven Chippewa Indians and by Sibley, Warren, and Aitkin. It is in the Sibley Papers.

1850.¹⁶ There had been some stock raising in the Minnesota region in the thirties when Joseph Renville, at Lac qui Parle owned, as Sibley said, "sheep by the hundreds and cattle by the score."¹⁷ As the decade of the thirties was the heyday of the fur trade in Minnesota, so the decade of the forties brought lumbering to the front as the predominant industry, and that of the fifties marked the transition to agriculture.

As has already been indicated, the early settlers in Minnesota were dependent upon the navigation of the Mississippi. The first steamboat to come up the river as far as Fort Snelling was the "Virginia" which arrived at that point on May 10, 1823, thus demonstrating that it was practicable for steamboats to navigate the Mississippi as far as the St. Peter's River. There was no regular steamboat line established, however, until 1847 when a company was formed, with Sibley as a member, to run a regular line of packets from Galena to Mendota.¹⁸

Very little government existed before 1840 in the region which became Minnesota. In that year the peninsula between the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers was included in the newly organized county of St. Croix, Wisconsin Territory. In the region west of the Mississippi, Sibley was for many years the sole representative of the law. "It was my fortune," he wrote, "to be the first to introduce the machinery of the law, into what our legal brethren would have termed a benighted region, having received a commission as Justice of the Peace

¹⁶ Daniel Stanchfield, "History of Pioneer Lumbering on the Upper Mississippi and its Tributaries, with Biographic Sketches," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:344; Edward Van Dyke Robinson, *Early Economic Conditions and the Development of Agriculture in Minnesota*, 40 (University of Minnesota, *Studies in the Social Sciences*, no. 3—Minneapolis, 1903).

¹⁷ Sibley, "Reminiscences; Historical and Personal," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:466 (1872 edition).

¹⁸ Edward D. Neill, "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2:107; J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul, and of the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, 173 (*M. H. C.*, vol. 4).

from the Governor of Iowa Territory, for the County of Clayton. This County was an empire in itself in extent, reaching from a line some twenty miles below Prairie du Chien on the west of the 'Father of Waters' to Pembina, and across to the Missouri river. As I was the only magistrate in this region and the county seat was some three hundred miles distant, I had matters pretty much under my own control, there being little chance of an appeal from my decisions. In fact some of the simple-minded people around me firmly believed that I had the power of life and death." Sibley was also the foreman of the first grand jury ever empaneled in Minnesota west of the Mississippi.¹⁹

The first movement in Congress for the organization of a territory west of Wisconsin was during the session of 1846-47 when the enabling act for Wisconsin was still under consideration. A bill "establishing the Territorial government of Minnesota [*sic*]," introduced by Morgan L. Martin, the delegate from Wisconsin Territory, passed the House but was not passed by the Senate, the chief objections being the scanty population, the fact that no lands had been surveyed and sold in the region, and the fact that the people there had not requested such organization. Another attempt was made during the following session through the efforts of Stephen A. Douglas, who introduced a bill into the Senate; but, although it received some consideration, Congress adjourned without passing it.²⁰ In the meantime, the state of Wisconsin had been admitted with the St. Croix as its western boundary. This situation apparently left the people who lived between the St. Croix and the Mississippi without political organization, and caused these pioneers to assert what they regarded as their rights to political organization and to representation in Con-

¹⁹ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:265, 267. Sibley's commissions as justice of peace, dated October 30, 1838, January 19, 1839, and July 17, 1840, are in the Sibley Papers.

²⁰ The progress of the bills may be traced in the *Congressional Globe*, 29 Congress, 2 session, 71, 441, 445, 572; 30 Congress, 1 session, 656, 1052.

gress. A convention was held at Stillwater on August 26, 1848; petitions were sent to Congress and the president asking for territorial organization; and Sibley was elected "delegate" from what the convention called Minnesota Territory "to represent the interests of the Territory at Washington."²¹ Shortly after this convention someone conceived the idea of regarding the region as Wisconsin Territory, after the part of that territory east of the St. Croix had been admitted as a state. The obliging former secretary of the Territory of Wisconsin, John Catlin, came to Stillwater and, as acting governor, issued writs for a special election for delegate to Congress from Wisconsin Territory. Although Sibley lived west of the Mississippi and therefore outside of the region under consideration, nevertheless he was chosen delegate to represent the territory in Congress and to secure the organization of Minnesota Territory. This plan was actually carried through; Sibley was seated and secured the desired organization in 1849.²²

Although time does not permit us to trace the beginnings of political parties in Minnesota or to sketch the story of the marvelous growth of the territory after the negotiation of the Sioux treaties of 1851, one at least, of the foremost questions during Sibley's congressional career, which extended from 1848 to 1852, deserves consideration in any study of his work or of the frontier problems. That is the question of Indian relations on the frontier. Sibley lived among the Indians for fifteen years and knew the working of the Indian policy of the government better than any other man then in Congress. He made eloquent appeals in behalf of the Indian; and his proposed solution of the problem foreshadows the constructive legislation of later years.²³ In particular, Sibley

²¹ The proceedings of this convention are published in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 55-59 (1872 edition).

²² *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 61 (1872 edition); *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 2 session, 137, 259, 485, 681.

²³ *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 session, part 1, p. 855; *Statutes at Large*, 16: 566.

warned Congress that the only alternative to a change in policy was an Indian war. "The busy hum of civilized communities," he said, "is already heard far beyond the mighty Mississippi. . . . Your pioneers are encircling the last home of the red man, as with a wall of fire. Their encroachments are perceptible, in the restlessness and belligerent demonstrations of the powerful bands who inhabit your remote western plains. You must approach these with terms of conciliation and of real friendship, or you must suffer the consequences of a bloody and remorseless Indian war. . . . The time is not far distant, when pent in on all sides and suffering from want, a Philip or a Tecumseh will arise to band them together for a last and desperate onset upon their white foes. . . . We know that the struggle in such case, would be unavailing on the part of the Indians, and must necessarily end in their extermination."²⁴ The system was not changed at that time and the consequences that Sibley had so accurately foretold came in the great Sioux uprising of 1862. It was Sibley to whom the Minnesota pioneers in their hour of need appealed to save them from the horrors of this Indian war.

Minnesota was admitted into the Union in 1858, and Sibley became its first governor. This was not a time of great prosperity because of the panic of 1857, and the administration was not an unqualified success. Sibley was made a good deal of a scapegoat over the "Five Million Dollar Loan" of state credit to railways.²⁵ This fiasco, together with the fact that the Republican party had had a very rapid growth since its organization in the territory in 1855, and the further fact that Sibley was a Douglas Democrat, meant that the days of his political career were numbered. He commanded expeditions against the Sioux from 1862 to 1865 and at the close of his military career retired to private life except for a term as a member of

²⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 session, part 2, p. 1508. See also Sibley to H. S. Foote, February 15, 1850, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 38 (1872 edition).

²⁵ For an account of this loan see William W. Folwell, "The Five Million Loan," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:189-214.

the state legislature many years later and for service as a regent of the University of Minnesota.²⁶ He died on February 18, 1891, universally mourned by the people of the great state for which he had labored so long and in the making of which he had taken such a distinguished part.

The aim of this paper has been not only to sketch the life of Sibley as a type, but also to attempt to portray, as he and other pioneers saw it, the gradual evolution of society and industry in the upper Mississippi country. The rapidity with which the West was settled is most vividly appreciated when viewed in terms of human life. In 1795, when Solomon Sibley came over the mountains to the first American frontier settlement northwest of the Ohio, the history of the great West was only in the period of beginnings. Before his son died, in 1891, the frontier had disappeared. When Sibley, in 1834, made his way into the region which became Minnesota, it was a typical fur-traders' frontier; when he died, Minnesota was a state with a population of almost one and one-half millions. The settlement and development of the region was so rapid that even those who witnessed it could scarcely realize the transformation that took place before their eyes. Sibley said in his later years that this transformation seemed to him "more like a pleasant dream than a reality."²⁷ But the work had been done. The labors of the pioneers to carve out of the wilderness a great state had been rewarded with success and the pioneer dreams had come true.

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²⁶ Much source material on the Sioux War of 1862-65 may be found in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, vol. 2 (St. Paul, 1899). There is a good secondary account in Frederick L. Paxson, *The Last American Frontier* (New York, 1910).

²⁷ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:276.



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