

RAILS WEST

The Rock Island Excursion of 1854

As reported by CHARLES F. BABCOCK

IN THE YOUTHFUL Minnesota settlements at the head of navigation on the Mississippi, the most spectacular event of the year 1854 occurred on June 8. It was marked by the arrival at the St. Paul levee of a flotilla of steamboats bringing about a thousand visitors. Among them were some of the nation's foremost journalists, clergymen, authors, scholars, businessmen, and politicians. Although their mere presence on the streets of St. Paul and St. Anthony gave the day significance in the annals of these communities, it is the reason for their journey that makes it worth while to call attention to the centennial of their visit. For the excursion in which they participated celebrated the completion of the first railroad to reach the Father of Waters—the Chicago and Rock Island. Since the road linked for the first time the Atlantic seaboard, Chicago, and the Mississippi

River, its operation had a tremendous impact upon the economy of every up-river community, and especially on those in the new Territory of Minnesota.

Actually the road between Chicago and Rock Island had been completed some months earlier. When the first train passed over its rails on February 22, 1854, its arrival at Rock Island was hailed by a "Railroad Festival," arranged to mark the "nuptials of the Atlantic with the Father of Waters" and to honor the builders, Henry Farnam and Joseph E. Sheffield. Following this local affair, the idea of a more pretentious celebration took shape in the minds of the contractors. Since they "were fully aware of the general ignorance that prevailed in the East with regard to the West," they decided to invite "some of their eastern friends to an excursion" that would carry them "not only over the line of the new road, but also up the Mississippi River to St. Paul, in order that they might see with their own eyes the resources of the New West."¹

Among the journalists who responded to

¹ See Henry W. Farnam, *Memoir of Henry Farnam*, 41, 69-76 (New Haven, 1889). A general account of the "Rock Island Railroad Excursion of 1854" by William J. Petersen appears in *Minnesota History*, 15:405-420 (December, 1934).

the invitation was James F. Babcock, editor of a leading Connecticut newspaper, the *New Haven Palladium*.² During the course of his journey, from June 1 to 15, he mailed from Cleveland, Chicago, Galena, Davenport, and even from the "Steamer Golden Era," on which he traveled northward from Rock Island, long and detailed letters that were published each day in his paper. Clipped from the *Palladium* and mounted in a little leather-bound notebook, a set was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1933 by Mr. Jefferson Jones of Minneapolis. With it was a handsome oil painting supposedly picturing the Mississippi in the vicinity of Red Wing as it looked in 1854. The view was painted to order for Babcock by George H. Durrie, a well-known New Haven artist who was famed especially for his portraits and farm scenes.³ That his concept of the upper Mississippi was based on descriptions rather than firsthand knowledge of the area is obvious to anyone who is familiar with the region. It is reproduced here with extracts from Babcock's letters. Together they call attention to a centennial of 1954 and commemorate an event that stirred the people living on the Minnesota frontier a hundred years ago.

WITH A number of other tourists from his home state, Babcock arrived in Chicago on June 3, and there he became infected with the "Western fever." Although he originally "thought of going no farther than Rock Island," he felt his fever rising upon learning that "the ladies of St. Anthony's Falls are preparing a pic-nic for the guests when they shall arrive there." This news caused the editor to exclaim: "Think of that! Ladies at St. Anthony's Falls, where I had anticipated seeing only Indians, bears, catamounts, and other like citizens of a primeval forest." His friends thus were able to persuade him to join the Mississippi excursion. At Rock Island he boarded the "Golden Era," and on June 5 he mailed the following report from Davenport.

THE BUSY NOTE of preparation for the Rock Island cars resounded through the hotels of Chicago at an early hour this morning, and continued until 8 o'clock, when the whistle sounded, and the cry of "all aboard," indicated that the moment of departure was at hand. Two trains of nine cars each moved off in the presence of a large crowd. The engines were gaily dressed, and the guests in high spirits, anticipating a trip of no ordinary interest and pleasure; and we presume that no one was disappointed, unless happily with the extraordinary natural attractions of the country, and the wonderful growth of the towns and villages through which we passed.

Our eastern friends, who have not seen the evidence with their own eyes, can have no possible conception of the rapid settlement of this western country. I had supposed that the Rock Island road passed almost entirely through a dreary solitude—but every half-hour of the day we had a view of thriving settlements, some of them apparently containing many thousand inhabitants. Among these prosperous towns, were Joliet, Ottawa, Peru, Sheffield, Geneseo, &c.

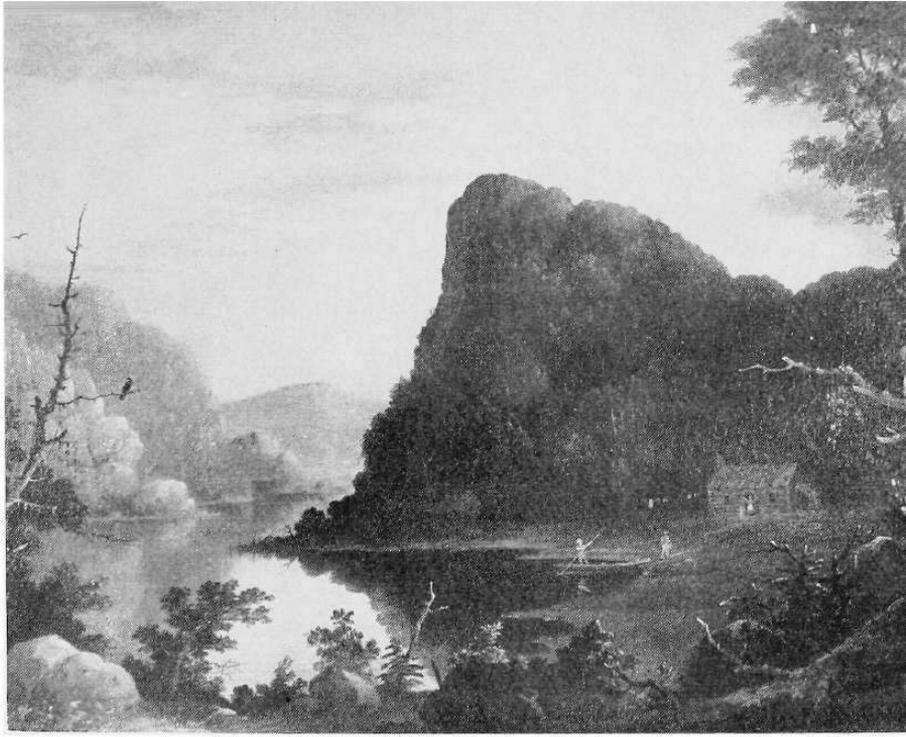
My longing eyes were gratified, for the first time, with the sight of a true Prairie. From Sheffield to Rock Island, we rolled along, miles upon miles, through a vast expanse of level soil, thickly matted with grass and beautifully decorated with blooming flowers. Occasionally a house could be seen looming up in the far distance, like a sail in mid ocean. Sometimes a rolling ridge would break the monotony of the prospect and increase the beauty of the scene.

. . . We reached Rock Island at 4 o'clock, and had our first view of the mighty Mis-

² Babcock edited the *Palladium* from 1830 to 1862. His successor was Cyrus Northrop, later president of the University of Minnesota. Edward E. Atwater, ed., *History of the City of New Haven*, 224 (New York, 1887).

³ For information on Durrie, see Atwater, *New Haven*, 208, and Mantle Fielding, *Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers*, 104 (Philadelphia, 1926).

DURRIE'S view
of the
upper Mississippi



Mississippi. Of course the sight created a marked sensation throughout the cars. The town of Rock Island contains about 4,500 inhabitants, and a great portion of these were ranged about the Depot awaiting the arrival of the cars, which, when they came up, were greeted with huzzas. In the river close by, lay our steamers, with their bows run upon the shore. They were the War Eagle, the Galena, the Lady Franklin, the Sparhawk, the Golden Era and the Jenny Lind.⁴ On each boat was a band of music, and all were in full play, while the passengers were passing from the cars to these vessels.

A Mississippi steamboat is a queer looking affair to a green Yankee. The hull is little less than a sharp pointed scow, while the upper works, two or three stories high, look in some respects like an Indian Pagoda. To me was assigned a state-room in the Golden Era. Ex-President [Millard] Fillmore is also a passenger. . . .

Soon after 5 o'clock, the company on

board the Golden Era sat down to an elegant dinner, which, as you may imagine, very rapidly disappeared, as there had been no chance for a meal since breakfast, which was at half-past 6. The miserable muddy water of the Mississippi, afforded a considerable number of men and women an opportunity to guard against injury by a few drops of brandy—and the flasks of liquor were numerous along the table. I have no doubt, however, that a majority really used the ardent as a supposed antidote to the water, and they were the more easily persuaded to try it because a few had found themselves unwell at Chicago and did not come to the river. . . .

The next letter is postmarked June 6, at Galena, where the flotilla arrived at 9:00 A.M. after "making one hundred miles from Rock Island during the night." There carriages were waiting to take to the lead mines any visitors who wished to see them. Babcock was one of the group, and he reported that he succeeded in "knocking off some specimens for the home cabinet." He noted that "The deepest shafts on the richest diggings are less than 200 feet, the

⁴In addition to these boats, the "Black Hawk" was called into service to accommodate the railroad's guests for the trip on the upper Mississippi. Petersen, in *Minnesota History*, 15:409.

greatest number less than 50 feet, while a large amount of ore is obtained just below the surface of the ground." Babcock predicted that "the town will always be one of importance."

A second letter of June 6, written on board the "Golden Era," tells of a stop at Dubuque and describes the dramatic scenery that began to appear along the river's banks. "Mountains, narrow plains, tangled forests and beautiful groves are sweeping by like a never ending panorama," Babcock reports, while at times there arise from the water "perpendicular cliffs, rounded out in front so as to resemble the baronial castle, with towers, turrets and battlements." Against such a background the tourists caught their first glimpse of blanketed Indians, whose presence was made known by a "wild shout on shore."

Babcock's enthusiasm for the scenic beauty of the upper river was further expressed in his next letter, dated June 7 and penned once more on board the steamer. He writes:

Scenes of interest have increased upon us from the rising to the setting sun of this day. The past, delightful and exciting as it has been, was monotonous compared with the pictures of beauty and grandeur which have succeeded each other like a magnificent panorama during the last eight hours. I refer not to the occasional views that opened from time to time in the form of bays, river-bends, rock-bound shores, bold bluffs, classic groves, solitary wastes, single log cabins, or clusters of these rude habitations, — but to mountain ranges, impressive from their majestic height, beautiful from their luxuriant verdure, wonderful for their varied and often fantastic conformation and their continuous stretch for miles along this magnificent country.

We are now passing through Wisconsin, much of which will favorably compare with Illinois, a State that I had supposed could not be beaten in any thing that a poet or utilitarian could desire. While we were passing through these highland sections of

the river, towards six o'clock this afternoon, the clouds, which had hung over us all day, sometimes throwing down heavy showers, rolled away, and the sun broke forth just as his disk was settling behind these vast hills, thus bringing out their diverse forms in well defined outline against a sky of the purest emerald green, while above hung, in crimson folds, a rich drapery formed of the few clouds that remained, the loitering remnants of the mass that had passed away. I have before spoken of seeming fortresses and castles, but, all along the regions to which I now refer, the illusion, in these respects was complete. No rock was to be seen except these seeming battlements, and they rested, on these mountain peaks, amid a mass of verdure, and were about equidistant — some square, some triangular, some circular, some semi-circular, and all in just the right position for the most impregnable defences.

During our progress up the river, we met several immense rafts, some guided by five or six men each, others by twice that number. They eat and sleep upon these rafts for weeks. They cheered our boats, swung their hats, and one of them, for the want of a piece of artillery, fired his rifle several times in the way of a salute. We are now at La Crosse, a thriving little settlement of several hundred inhabitants. . . .

Passing on, we came to a pleasant shore on which is piled a large amount of wood, prepared for the boats. Many cords are measured off with a stick, and the hands proceed to take it on board. Here, in front of us, is a log house of a superior order. The logs are all hewn, and the building has two rooms besides an attic. Over the door is written, on a log, the words "Post Office." Two girls stand on the steps, and a woman, with a true Yankee face, sits at the window. She was from New Hampshire, and is quite intelligent and communicative.

Soon, her husband, the postmaster, a Massachusetts man, came along, and invited us to ascend the mountain, back of his house, and see the extensive prairie be-

yond. A portion of us gladly accepted his offer. Your correspondent reached within fifteen feet of the highest point; but our celebrated horticultural friend caught a glimpse of a *strawberry vine* higher up, and he made after it; he has it now safely boxed in Wisconsin earth, and in a year or two you may expect to hear of a new strawberry of the "Lines variety;" perhaps it will be called "the excursion strawberry."⁵ Six or eight gentlemen, and one young lady persevered until they reached the summit of the "tall cliff." The view from this mountain, which is 475 feet high, is most attractive. Close at its base lie our steamers, "wooding up." Passengers are scattered about the shore, and winding their way up the mountain.

Those who reached the summit gazed first upon a "prairie of green, stretching away for miles, with the surface broken only here and there by the plow," and then turned to the river "as it rolls proudly onward to the sea." The climbers offered to pay the postmaster for piloting them up the mountain. "He refused, with some spirit, to be compensated," Babcock reports, "saying he would willingly pay fifty dollars if every man and woman in the boats would come up and see what a country was lying around him."

As the tourists were getting ready to depart, three or four Indians came out of the woods. Babcock describes them thus:

They are hideous specimens, for their faces are painted, except the chin, so they look almost demoniacal. The squaw is coaxed on board, and into the ladies' saloon. The crowd of passengers press close around her and she grows timid. She drops on her knees and creeps along among the

⁵ Professor Charles B. Lines of Yale University, one of the members of the excursion party who came from the writer's home community, is mentioned several times in Babcock's letters.

⁶ For a discussion of the many versions of "The Winona Legend," see G. Hubert Smith in *Minnesota History*, 13:367-376 (December, 1932).

gentlemen until she gets to the plank, over which she goes ashore—retreats to a pile of boards, where, rolled in her blanket, she stretches herself at length, occasionally lifting her head to see what "*her man*" is about. He is near the boat—his rifle lying within reach, while he is picking up sugar plums, dimes and quarters, which are thrown to him. He is too lazy to walk about after his gifts, preferring to sit down and reach as far as he can—then hitch along, and repeat the gathering process. The others stand back looking on.

We are off again—have passed several small settlements, among them "Winona," named after the Indian maiden who loved a young hunter, but whose papa and mamma were opposed to the match. They wanted her to take a young warrior who had distinguished himself in the fights with the Chippewas. She ascended one of the bluffs on the shore of Lake Pepin, sang a funeral dirge, and, although her dear parents begged her to come down and marry ["her own true love," she was bent upon her destruction, and therefore took the fatal leap, and died a victim of disappointed love.⁶

Not far beyond Winona, "by a clear moonlight," the flotilla came out upon the broad expanse of Lake Pepin—a scene that Babcock describes dramatically as follows:

The signal whistle has been blown, and the five [*sic*] boats are nearing each other to enter the lake, like chariot horses, all abreast. We are now all in a platoon. The vessels are made fast amid the cheers of seven or eight hundred passengers. Now the ten wheels are in motion, and on we go. The guests are visiting, and there is music and dancing, reading, writing, and conversation. This afternoon Prof. [Benjamin] Silliman [of Yale] delivered a lecture, to the company in his boat, on the geology of the Mississippi mountains. There was also other speaking. In the same boat a handsome purse of money has been contributed for a

present to the captain, as a mark of regard.

On board of this boat it has been agreed to present, to the infant son of Mr. Farnham, a gold cup with a suitable inscription, and two hundred dollars have been contributed for that purpose. The little fellow is a passenger with us, and has not whimpered since he left Chicago.⁷ He deserves a cup. Meetings will be held to-morrow to obtain a farther expression of the sentiments of the guests in relation to this most delightful excursion, and of thanks towards those who were instrumental in projecting it.

We are now in the midst of Lake Pepin, a charming sheet of water, with rich and varying boundaries. How fast these scenes of grandeur and beauty succeed each other! Several of the ladies who are promenading past the tables of the editors, tell us not to be sparing of *adjectives*, in describing the things of this afternoon and evening. . . . But it is now midnight, and I must retire to be ready for a sight of the city of St. Paul, which we shall see early in the forenoon.

As the boats approached the city on the morning of June 8, Babcock wrote:

The long looked for town of St. Paul is but a half hour's sail ahead of us. We are, of course, all anxious to see what kind of a place it is that we are approaching, and that we have so often heard spoken of as the head of the navigation of this great river. We have on board our boat many travelers who have seen a great portion of both continents, but have never yet set foot or eyes upon the city of St. Paul. There it is, lying well up on a plat of land about thirty feet above the river, with streets leading down the bank to the shore. There we see five or six churches and a building much larger than the State House at New Haven. It is of brick, a main building and two large wings. That imposing structure is the Legislative Hall of the Territorial Government of Minnesota. Here are ample streets, upon which are all kinds of buildings of moderate pretensions. The city bears all the marks of youth, for it is but six years old — and yet it appears full three times as large as your town of Fair Haven — I mean in respect to the number of its

⁷ Henry W. Farnham, who as an infant accompanied his parents on the excursion of 1854, later became professor of economics at Yale University. He is the author of the *Memoir* of his father published in 1889.

THE Falls of St. Anthony in the 1850s, as pictured by Edwin Whitefield



buildings. It seems to cover more ground than even New Haven. This ground is generally table land, as level as a prairie, though high above the river. It is a city of 5000 inhabitants. Five years ago, when the territorial government was organized, there was throughout the entire territory a population of only 4,780—less than the present population of this six year old city.⁸

Later in the day, Babcock had more to report to his readers back in Connecticut.

The excursion party landed from their steamers this forenoon amid the cheers of the people, who gathered from all points as soon as the news spread that the boats had arrived. They appear to be much chagrined that they had not perfected their arrangements for our reception. They say we have taken them by surprise, as they did not look for us until to-morrow, at which time their military were to appear and other demonstrations to be made. Besides, carriages were engaged for the whole company, for a trip to the Falls and the village of St. Anthony. Now all is bustle and confusion on shore, and all sorts of vehicles are coming down the bank. There

⁸ Settlement began on the site of St. Paul as early as 1840, and the chapel from which the city takes its name was erected in the following year. The settlers, however, were squatters until 1848, when the government offered the land for sale. The census of 1849 gave Minnesota Territory a population of 4,852, including soldiers. By 1854, according to an informal estimate, the figure had grown to 32,000. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 223, 225, 352, 360 (St. Paul, 1921).

⁹ Baldwin had been governor of Connecticut in 1844 and 1845.

¹⁰ Woodward was editor of the *New Haven Courier*, according to Farnam, *Memoir*, 76, and the *Minnesotian* (St. Paul), June 9, 1854.

¹¹ In 1854 Flagg was comptroller of New York City; earlier he had served his state in a similar capacity.

¹² Barry was governor of Michigan from 1842 to 1846 and from 1849 to 1851. Twining was a well-known inventor, engineer, and astronomer, who resided in New Haven.

¹³ Among the visiting journalists was Charles Welden of the *New York Times*. *Minnesotian*, June 9, 1854.

sit Gov. [Roger S.] Baldwin and Mrs. B. in high back chairs in a long lumber wagon, in company with a dozen more on similar seats.⁹ There, in just such a wagon, sit Mr. [C. J.] McCurdy and daughter, surrounded by other ladies and gentlemen. There are Judge J. O. Phelps, C. B. Lines, and Mr. [James M.] Woodward of the *Journal*,¹⁰ in a very handsome one horse buggy. They have not waited for the uncertain movements of the committee, but have been to a stable and provided for themselves. There is James Brewster and wife in another similar carriage. There is Rev. Dr. [Leonard] Bacon, Rev. Mr. Eggleston, Rev. Dr. Fitch and others, in a lumber wagon. I had done my best to procure a conveyance for one of our clergymen and his wife, and an editor here had promised to find one for them. It was now time to inquire, as did Daniel Webster, on an important occasion, "*Where shall I go?*"—"Have you room on top of that stage coach?"—"No," said a Mr. [A. P.] Cumming[s], of the *New York Observer*, "this coach is engaged." Mr. Cumming appeared to have monopolized two or three coaches, and had turned out of one of them the wife and daughter of Mr. [A. C.] Flagg, Controller of New York State.¹¹ Mr. F. was one of the principal originators of the excursion. A St. Paul man told us to get a seat where we could, and that no one had engaged the coach except the committee, and they had provided it for *any* of the party. "Here is room," said Prof. [Alexander C.] Twining, "come up here." We were soon on the vehicle, and took position between Gov. [John S.] Barry of Michigan, and Mr. Twining.¹² On the seat below was Mr. [George] Bancroft, the historian, his son, and the driver of the carriage—and back of all was stretched out one of the editors of the *New York Times*.¹³ The inside of the coach was chiefly filled with ladies. Three or four other stages were crowded in like manner.

The various carriages began to move on up the hill into the main street. Here is a fine view, for miles, and almost every kind

and quality of buildings are to be seen. We now pass a three story brick building, marked in large letters, "Office of the Daily Times." The newspaper there is conducted by our friend T. M. Newson, formerly of the Derby Journal.¹⁴ His paper would be creditable to any of the eastern cities, and I am glad to learn that it is much approved and that he is greatly esteemed here. Unquestionably he will soon become one of the leading men of this section of the country. He has the talents and energy requisite for success. There are, however, four daily papers in this small city, some of which must suffer for some time, for the want of a healthy support.¹⁵

We pass on, ascending a hill which overlooks the whole place. On either hand are wide prairie plains, the Mississippi on our left, resembling here some parts of the Housatonic. Forests and shrubs are seen in various directions, and the scenery not unlike that observed in some of the drives around New Haven.

Here was an incident which was near proving a serious accident. The historian, Bancroft, has fallen from his seat to the ground, and we all fear is crushed by the carriage wheels; but, fortunately, he escapes injury. In searching the pockets of his coat he lost his balance. The efforts of his son to save him were near bringing him directly under the coach. He remounts his seat, and we are once more on our way.

We have now driven seven miles, an[d] passed several cultivated fields, some log houses, and some wooden dwellings, resembling somewhat our New England farm houses. The Falls are two miles distant, making nine from St. Paul. Here is a tower of observation, similar to that near the New York Crystal Palace. The American flag is flying over it. For a dime you can ascend and take a look at the country around.¹⁶ Several of the party are going up. Our stage passes on. Now we have on our left the first glimpse of the Falls and the village close by them. It is another large town of two or three thousand inhabitants. We were not

expected here until to-morrow. The wagons and stages are crowding up, and the party are thronging to the Falls. Some are standing on the bank above them, viewing the rapids, which resemble very much those just above Niagara. Some are crossing a small and frail foot bridge of planks a few rods above the precipice, and some are on a similar frail bridge below. We fear disaster with so many crowding those weak stagings. There goes the editor of the New York Times. He has stepped upon a log — it rolls, and he has gone down. He rises, and holds on to the log — a friendly hand is reached out and he is drawn up, somewhat scared and a good deal wet.

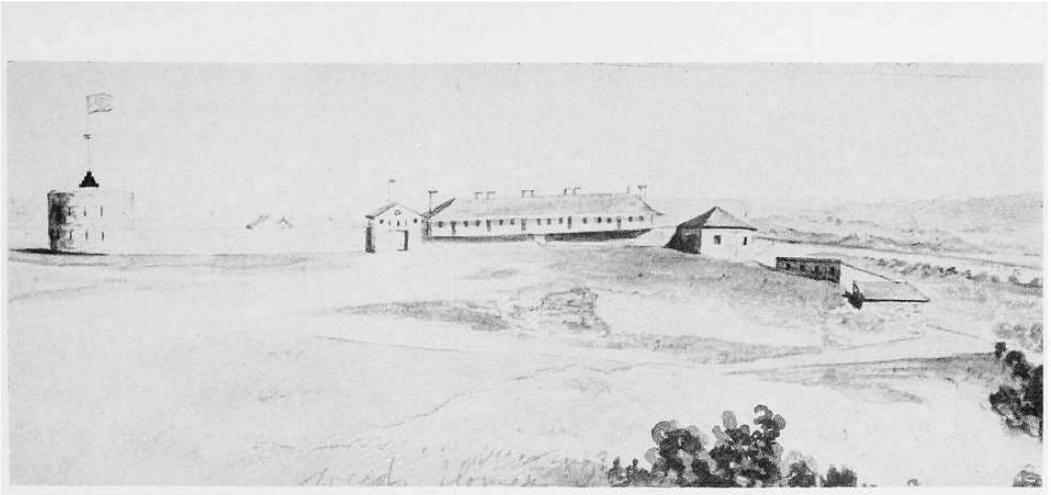
Here on the banks are most of those I have named as having started with us, together with Judge Wood, Prof. Silliman and wife, Mr. and Mrs. [Abram N.] Littlejohn, Mr. [John S.] Boswell, of the Hartford Courant, and wife, and numerous others of the party. Among our New Haven friends there is a general shaking of hands and hearty congratulations. The company are now scattered all around the Falls — some cutting canes to carry home as mementos, others searching for agate stones which are occasionally found here, and others knocking off pieces of the limestone rock, in which are imbedded fossil shells. . . .

The Falls in their general form have some resemblance to those of Niagara — I mean the shape of the precipice. The fall of water is only about twenty or thirty feet. A large body of water goes over them. Huge

¹⁴ Before settling in St. Paul in 1853, Thomas M. Newson published the *Derby Journal* at Birmingham, Connecticut. *Daily Pioneer Press* (St. Paul), April 1, 1893.

¹⁵ In addition to the *Times*, the *Minnesota Pioneer*, the *Democrat*, and the *Minnesotian* were issued daily in St. Paul in the summer of 1854. See J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul*, 350–352 (St. Paul, 1876).

¹⁶ The tower, which was erected by William A. Cheever and was known by his name, was located on the present University of Minnesota campus. Over the entrance was a sign reading "Pay your dime and climb." William E. Leonard, "Early Days in Minneapolis," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:498 (St. Paul, 1915).



FORT Snelling in the 1850s, as pictured by Edwin Whitefield

rocks have fallen from the brink below, and in some places logs of immense size have formed a lodgement and are packed in from the bed of the river to the top of the precipice.

But it is time to return to St. Paul. The boats leave there at 5 o'clock, for a trip . . . to Fort Snelling. . . .

The bells ring, and we are all on board and down to as fine a dinner as ever graced the tables of the Astor House. . . .

In a third letter of June 8, Babcock opens by expressing his delight with a short excursion to the military post at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. Of the fort, he writes:

It is on a commanding site at a bend of the river, and about three hundred rods distant from its bank. We pass over that distance of prairie land — or meadow land, we should call it in Connecticut — and begin to ascend the bluff by a winding road. The buildings, of which there are seven, are all connected with the walls, and form an octagon, covering nearly as much space as your lower Green. They look strong enough to resist any siege. From the highest building, or the round fort, the United States flag is flying.

Soldiers are marching back and forth at the gates keeping guard; but our army of

men and women march in by companies and battalions, taking the fort by a storm of superior numbers. The soldiers give way, and the officers "do the amiable" as well as they can amid the rush of the representatives of the Atlantic shores. The march of civilization has rendered Fort Snelling nearly useless. It was an important military post a few years ago, when the Indians were monarchs of all this section of country. But they are now nearly as obsolete as the fort.

The prospect all around from the walls of Fort Snelling is very pleasing, particularly at this season, when the verdure upon the hills and plains is so rich and inviting. But this is a cold section of the country. Winter reigns about six months in the year, and in the winter the thermometer is steadily down, for weeks at a time, to forty degrees below zero. The people, however, say they do not suffer as much from cold as do those of New England, where the weather is more variable. This may be so; nevertheless, the summer season is short and the land cannot be as productive as the soil of lower latitudes. I think that, for this reason, Minnesota will never rival Iowa or Illinois. . . .

The bells of our boats are ringing, and their steam whistles are sending their notes, in shrill echoes, far away in the distance, a signal for the gathering in of the multitude. They throng the meadows in platoons and single files. The boats all lie close

together, with their bows well on the shore. This fact is a constant source of wonder to your correspondent, who feels that they must be aground past help, except that of a high tide, where no tide is. But as there are no wharves on the river, the boats are constructed expressly to lie up on the edge of the banks. Their hulls, if hulls they can be called, are shallow and much resemble an elongated tea saucer. Of course the bottoms are flat and draw but little water—no more than a common scow. The furnace, boiler and engines are all within this shallow enclosure.

Above all this, are the saloons and state rooms, running the entire length of the boat, with no machinery or other obstruction. The saloons are therefore very splendid; but I cannot say as much for the State rooms, which are too contracted. They have each two berths, one above the other. In these state rooms there is no room for a writing table or even a wash stand, and hardly room for dressing. The state room doors open outside upon a narrow promenade, and inside into the saloons. Above them is the promenade deck, and still above that the wheel-house and pilot's room, all enclosed in glass. So these boats are really three stories high, and these stories all rest upon mere planks, or a saucer, called the hull. They make a very showy appearance in the water. Of course they would be too top heavy for lake or sound navigation, where the winds are fierce and the seas rolling. These boats are said not to be as large as those lower down the river, which ply between New Orleans and St. Louis.

I know not what is their common fare, but ours has been a succession of luxuries from the first meal to the last. We have had oysters and lobsters daily, though two thousand miles from the sea. These, of course, were brought in sealed cans. Hens, turkeys and ducks have given their last *squeak* every morning. Two cows, on the lower deck, furnish us fresh milk twice a day. Meats are cooked in every variety of style, and the dessert consists of all kinds of

fruits, nuts, cakes, confection, ices, and other things too numerous to mention. Such is our daily fare. Then there are meats for supper, with tea and coffee—with toast dry and wet, cold bread, warm bread, Indian bread, biscuit, rolls, &c., &c.

The captain of our boat, [Hiram] Bersie, is a prince of a man, and a particular favorite with all the ladies, as well as gentlemen. He gives up his entire boat, even his office, to the use of the passengers. Our friends in the other steamers boast of being as fortunate, and even insist that theirs is the lucky boat, with the best company and the best captain. I, of course, go in for our boat, the Golden Era, our captain and our company. Besides, we have on board the ex-President of the United States, and Mr. Farnham, the master spirit of the expedition, to whose kind offices we are all indebted more than words can express. He is every where present, contributing all his efforts to our instruction, amusement and comfort.

We are now nearing St. Paul again. Here comes, up the stairway of our boat, a beautiful black eyed, black haired maiden, elegantly dressed, preceded by a young man as well dressed, and looking like a Wall street broker's clerk. A citizen of St. Paul says their mother is a half-breed Indian. Their father was an early trader here, and is the richest man in the place. The young lady is highly accomplished and quite interesting. There are many such in this section of the country, and their blood is no serious impediment to their matrimonial connection. . . .

It is now sundown. Our boats have touched the shore, and the five or six bells of the churches of St. Paul are all ringing us a welcome. The great legislative hall is brilliantly illuminated, and invitations are brought down for all the party to go to the gathering. Some go in stages and some on foot. We enter. On the lower floor is a spacious room; in one of the wings is the Governor's room. The windows are decorated with lace and damask curtains. Here

is the ex-President of the United States, the Governor of Minnesota, and a host of other dignitaries.

We ascend to the second story. Here is the grand reception room, and a large company of ladies and gentlemen. The ladies of the party and the ladies of St. Paul are in full dress, and the scene more resembles one often observed in the saloons of New York than one that could have been anticipated in any place in this new territory. In the opposite wing, on the same floor, are tables of refreshments, consisting of a great variety of delicacies, prepared with much taste. In the vestibule, seated on a platform, is a large band of music, and in the main room, which is hung with evergreens and other decorations, the company are forming quadrilles, and joining in the merry dance.

In the reception room, Governor [Willis A.] Gorman, of the Territory, rises to speak. He addresses President Fillmore in particular, and says that though an opponent of his administration, he is happy to endorse his measures generally.¹⁷ He makes a long speech, bidding him, the projectors of the Rock Island Railroad, the originators of the present excursion, the members of the press, and all present a hearty welcome. The President replies, thanking the Governor for the allusions to himself, and his administration, and alludes indirectly, and we think unfortunately, to the humbug Compromise of 1850, which it appears had only invited the repeal of that of 1820.¹⁸ He speaks approvingly of the enterprise of the West and wishes it continued prosperity. . . .

The shrill whistles of the steamers are now heard and hasty farewells are given. The people entreat us to remain longer; but

¹⁷ Gorman was an appointee of President Franklin Pierce, whose Democratic administration succeeded Fillmore's Whig administration in 1853.

¹⁸ The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was repealed early in 1854. The Compromise of 1850 was a feature of Fillmore's administration. Both represented attempts to maintain a balance between slave and free states. See the *Dictionary of American History*, 1:442, 3:428-430.

the inexorable steamers demand the return of their flocks, which are all moving to the shore. The last carriage is at the river, and the last man leaps breathless upon the plank. One boat after another drops down the stream. We are on our way back to Rock Island and Davenport.

On the trip downstream, passengers on the "Golden Era" collected about three hundred dollars for the purchase of a silver pitcher to be given to Captain Bersie "with sincere thanks for his kindness and attention" to their wants during the entire voyage. They also arranged a "ceremony of presenting the golden cup" to the Farnam baby "in anticipation of handing over the goblet itself, which was yet to be made." John A. Rockwell of Norwich, Connecticut, made an address to the infant, and Professor Twining responded "in behalf of the child." By June 10, the boats were again in Rock Island, where the tourists parted regretfully.

Back in New Haven on June 15, Babcock penned his final word, summing up his impressions of the land he had seen:

With the West everything was impressive from its vastness. It is in truth the "Great West"—great for its business resources—great for its ocean lakes, whose surfaces are rippled all over with the wakes of steamers and sailing vessels, bearing millions of value in merchandise and agricultural products—great for countless acres of prairie and other lands, which a mysterious Providence has kept away from the sight of civilization until He directed the enterprising, indomitable people, who comprise this nation, to come and possess them—great for its majestic rivers, especially that one which sweeps its mighty flood from the British dominions two thousand miles to the sea—great for its vast stretches of railroads which spread their iron net work from lake to lake and river to river, binding towns and States into one people and one interest.



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