



STEVENS' house  
as sketched  
in the 1850s

## *The Papers of* JOHN HARRINGTON STEVENS

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EARLY IN 1954 Mrs. Charles S. Pillsbury of Minneapolis presented to the Minnesota Historical Society five hundred letters and other documents left by her grandfather, John Harrington Stevens. Rich in data about Minnesota and other parts of the United States, these papers were added to a collection begun in 1893, when Stevens followed the example of many another Minnesota pioneer by personally giving some of his papers to the society. During the years since, several people have enriched the Stevens collection by adding to it. With their additions and Mrs. Pillsbury's significant gift, the collection now numbers fifteen hundred pieces covering the years from 1839 to 1890.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent acquisition increases materially the usefulness of a group of papers that students of Minnesota history had al-

ways considered valuable. The wealth of information, covering experiences of members of the Stevens family in Lower Canada, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Minnesota, can only be suggested here.

The earliest letter, dated February 3, 1839, was written to John Stevens by his brother, Gardner, while he was living in a "bachelor's camp" in Kishwaukee, Illinois, cutting and splitting rails. In telegraphic fashion, he disposes of the Illinois weather, the business of getting out rails, and his thoughts about moving on to the Wisconsin River. The main part of his letter, however, is devoted to a report that reached him about a "general rising amongst the Patriots" in Canada. The arrival of a group of emigrants from Upper Canada, "many of them armed to the teeth with patriotism, cursing the despotick tyrannical Gover-

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<sup>1</sup>These papers came to the society through the efforts of its president, Mr. Carl W. Jones of Minneapolis.

ment of Canada most bitterly," gave him a chance to learn much about discontent in Canada.

Although Gardner Stevens' letter was written in 1839, most of the papers date from a period that began a decade later, when John Stevens went to Minnesota Territory at the age of twenty-nine. Behind him lay experiences as a boy in Brompton, in the Province of Quebec, Canada, several years as a pioneer in Galena, Illinois, and two years in the quartermasters department during the Mexican War. Before him was a career in Minnesota that touched almost every vital concern of the territory and the state: immigration, agriculture, transportation, government, trade, religion, journalism, and education. Stevens' white, clapboarded house, the first built on the west side of the Mississippi River on the site of Minneapolis, was the hub of the community.<sup>2</sup> There one might have attended meetings of claim associations and agricultural societies, church services, and discussions looking toward the organization of the University of Minnesota.

The complicated struggle for the possession of the Fort Snelling Military Reservation is the subject of a large group of letters written from 1850 to 1856 by Stevens, Henry M.

Rice, the territorial delegate to Congress, and Franklin Steele, sutler at Fort Snelling. The latter was one of the first people Stevens met when he arrived in Minnesota, and in time he became Steele's clerk and his partner in operating a store at Minneapolis, in building a business block there, and in holding land claims. At the time of Stevens' arrival, the reservation, comprising eight thousand acres, was the most coveted tract of land in the vicinity of what is now the Twin Cities. Since the land in the reservation was not for sale, settlers squatted there without benefit of law. Encouraged by Steele, Stevens had in 1849 staked out a claim, with the permission of the war department, on the west side of the river. From that time until 1856, Stevens worked ceaselessly for the protection of his interests. Through a claim association and the territorial delegate, Henry M. Rice, in Washington, D.C., he did everything possible to promote legislation favorable to settlers on the reserve. Beseiged by Stevens and other Minnesotans, Rice expressed his weariness with the long struggle on their behalf in a letter dated January 7, 1856: "I am tired out with work — that reserve has worn out a large number of boots for me."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 1896 the Stevens House was moved to Minnehaha Park in Minneapolis, where it is still to be seen.

<sup>3</sup> An account of the long struggle for the reduction and sale of the Fort Snelling reservation may be found in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:422-434, 503-515 (St. Paul, 1921).

ONE OF Stevens' earliest and most persistent interests in Minnesota was the encouragement of settlement. In his zeal to see Minneapolis developed, he gave to stores, hotels, and churches, a number of lots, or

*STEVENS and his companions locating a townsite*



sold them for nominal sums. He corresponded with groups of people in the East who wanted to form colonies in Minnesota, took out a membership in townsite companies, and worked to provide new communities in which he was interested with postal service, roads, and railroads. In 1856 he gave evidence of his faith in the townsite of Glencoe by moving there with his family. Other sites in which he was interested were Hutchinson, Karns City, and Excelsior. In the Stevens Papers are several certificates showing that Stevens was a shareholder in some of the sites.

Among Stevens' associates in developing townsites was an artist named Edwin Whitefield.<sup>4</sup> To advertise the sites, he produced somewhat glorified pictures of the locations, which sometimes were lithographed in color and widely distributed. He is represented in the Stevens collection by a letter of December 24, 1856, in which he refers to his artistic activities and specifies the compensation he expects to receive for his work. "With regard to Hutchinson I have heard nothing," writes Whitefield. "If any thing is done in reference to Glencoe or Hutch<sup>a</sup> it must be done *immediately*. My terms were if the company of each raised \$200, I would take \$100 in a lot . . . and the other \$100 must be sent me in cash. . . . Each of these will be about 20 feet long." In the same letter he discussed views of Rapid Water, Fremont, St. Paul, and St. Anthony. Whitefield believed that his wife was a better booster for the townsites than he: "she is very enthusiastic about Minnesota, and is setting the women she gets acquainted with perfectly crazy on the subject."

Stevens spread word of Minnesota, and particularly the townsites, by writing letters, talking to people on his travels, using stories in the columns of the newspapers he edited, and supplying information to other editors.<sup>5</sup> He became such a widely known source of information about the state that newspapermen urged him to keep writing. One writer, O. M. Kelley of Itasca — a correspondent for the *National Republican* at Washington,

D.C. — asked him for news in a letter of March 16, 1864, and appealed for support by giving his own record in publicizing Minnesota: "I have since 1849 written & had published, out of our state, over *eight hundred* letters regarding Minnesota," adding later: "I claim to be as full of public spirit as a dog is full of fleas."

AS A BUSINESSMAN, Stevens was interested in cranberries, in which there was a small but important trade in territorial Minnesota. Writing to Stevens from New Orleans on January 16, 1850, Jacob Schreiner records the fate of one cranberry marketing expedition: "I will now proceed to give you an account of my bad success with the cranberries," he reports. "I would have done wise to have sold them at St. Louis, at any price. When I arrived here I found the market so glutted, that it was impossible to sell them at wholesale or in a short time & I soon found that I w<sup>d</sup> be obliged to put them in to the hands of a commission merchant *or* to produce a Lisence to retail. . . . They commenced rotting before the half of them were Sold." On this venture, Schreiner showed a loss of \$241.27.

The ginseng trade also drew Stevens' interest.<sup>6</sup> The subject brought a letter by E. J. McGehee, who wrote on July 8, 1859: "I see by the 'Pioneer and Democrat' that you are

<sup>4</sup>The society recently acquired twenty-seven water colors made by Whitefield in Minnesota in 1856 and 1857 and a sketchbook containing his pictorial records of field trips made with Stevens. The pictures reproduced with this article are from this collection.

<sup>5</sup>For information about Stevens' experiences as an editor and journalist on papers published in Minneapolis, Glencoe, and elsewhere, see Isaac Atwater, *History of the City of Minneapolis*, 1:361, 379 (New York, 1893).

<sup>6</sup>Although ginseng was known to exist in the Big Woods, it was not dug in quantity in Minnesota until 1858. St. Peter became the principal depot in the Minnesota Valley for the collection of the plant. It was then shipped from St. Paul and Hastings to dealers in Philadelphia, who in turn exported it to China, where it was widely used for medicinal purposes. See Joseph A. Wheelock, *Minnesota: Its Place among the States*, 109 (Minnesota Bureau of Statistics, *First Annual Report* — Hartford, 1860).

all digging Ginseng to set the Chinese chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy. A mine of gold is thus discovered in the 'big woods' beneath the ground but not in yellow sands or Scales. The fact is *gold* to do much good had better have alloy in it and the alloy of honest labor gives it its best and most enduring value. The fabulous turning of every thing into gold by a touch was found not to work so well and I am inclined to think that under this ancient fable is concealed the useful fact I have first stated."

**WEALTH** John Stevens wanted, but he was not afraid of the alloy recommended by his friend. By the time he reached his forties, he had already suffered enough reverses as a businessman, editor, and farmer to make him feel the necessity of refurbishing his fortune. As a result, during the Civil War he went to Tennessee, Louisiana, and other parts of the South to deal in cotton. On his travels he wrote home to his wife, instructing her in the management of his Minnesota affairs and reporting concisely, often eloquently, on his observations of parts of the country new to him. In a letter of June 14, 1864, he described Natchez as the "prettiest city I was ever in," and, capitulating entirely, he wrote on July 13: "There is no use denying that it is a splendid country." Although he was trying to buy cotton and get it out

of the South, send money home to his wife, and preserve his life in a hostile country, he found time to note the climate, fruits, vegetables, and the plan of the cities. His "cotton speculation" over, he returned to Minnesota, but not without thinking long about purchasing a plantation in the South and moving his family there. The letters do not explain the exact nature of his business nor its outcome.

**STEVENS** was an active participant in the affairs of city, county, and state government. In the state legislature, where he served four terms as senator or representative between 1858 and 1876, he gave evidence of his concern with education, road construction, and railroads. He expressed his belief that railroads and the Five Million Loan Bill—in essence a loan of public credit to the land grant railroads—were essential to Minnesota in a letter penned wearily, but in a mood of elation, late in the night of March 5, 1858: "I have for the last ten hours been on a rail road committee, and as you may suppose been very buisy, and to say the least I am tired and worn out. It is now late at night and the work we have accomplished . . . seals the destiny of this state, Either for weal or woe. It is the reccomendation of the 5000,000 loan bill. The committee (nine of us) were unanimously in favor of recco-

*STEVENS and his party preparing to cross a swamp*



mending to the House that such a law should be passed. The Effect of this will be to make money very plenty for the next few years — and if we are prudent we shall reap a rich reward, but if Extravegant the State, the people and the rail roads will all sink together, when the bubble bursts.” Had Stevens been able to pierce the future, his mood might have been more somber. He lived to hear the cry of “corruption” directed against the legislature that passed the bill, and finally, in 1860, to see an amendment to the state constitution repealing the action taken in 1858.<sup>7</sup>

AGRICULTURE was another of Stevens’ lifelong interests. As president of the state agricultural society, he encouraged the importation of blooded stock, the improvement of crops, and the education of farmers. Among the speakers Stevens invited to address the farmers at the State Fair of 1863, held at Fort Snelling, was Horace Greeley, who had filled such an engagement in Minnesota two years earlier. Greeley refused the 1863 invitation, but said in a letter of August 16: “Let me . . . beg the Farmers of Minnesota to have patience with me and to excuse my absence from their Fair this autumn, in the Sanguine hope that the next summer’s sun will smile upon our country reunited peaceful and secure.”

From such questions of import to the state, Stevens moved with ease and dignity to discussions of homely matters like one of his daughter’s compositions. To “My Dear Kitty,” he wrote on February 19, 1865: “I notice in your letter that you spell scholar with two l’s. You also bring your K’s to far below the line; otherwise you do Exceedingly well. You compose well, your language is chaste and well expressed; in most instances grammatical, with a well selected assortment of words, for all of which I am very grateful.”

The catholicity of interest that marks John Stevens did not dim with age. He was always

concerned with new opportunities in the expanding West. When he was seventy — with still ten years of life ahead of him — he wrote on March 25, 1890, to his son Gardner, traveling in another part of the country: “You have never written any thing about the country. I wish you would. I would like to learn about their cattle, horses, hogs and sheep; their wheat, oats, and corn; their fruit and their products generally as well as their schools, churches and society. I want to know all about the climate. Of course I never expect to live there; probably shall never see the country, but I am dreadful fond of Knowing all about every part of the United States.”

Thus, the man who had seen small towns at the head of Mississippi River navigation grow into cities populated by thousands looked at distant horizons in his old age. While he looked to the future, to the fulfilling promise of the greatness he saw in the West, he respected the importance of keeping a record of the past. His papers, rich in material for the social, political, and economic historian, are his legacy to the future.

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## Memorials

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Whenever a contribution is received for the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

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<sup>7</sup> For the story of the Five Million Loan Bill, see Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:37–58 (St. Paul, 1924).



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