



ALEXANDER Ramsey
as he looked
in November, 1849

With Governor Ramsey to MINNESOTA in 1849

Edited by FRANCES UREVIG

IN THE SPRING of 1849, Minnesotans looked forward eagerly to the arrival of Alexander Ramsey, newly appointed governor of the territory, for they regarded the young Pennsylvanian as a symbol of American law and order. Citizens of the triangle of settled land between the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers had been without formal government for almost a year. The area had been a part of Wisconsin Territory, but when Wisconsin was admitted to the Union in May, 1848, the region west of the St. Croix had been excluded from the new state. Through the efforts of Henry H. Sibley, delegate to Congress from the leftover portion of Wisconsin, Minnesota Territory was created on March 3, 1849.

MISS UREVIG is editorial assistant on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society.

After the first steamboat of the season reached St. Paul on April 9, 1849—bringing the welcome news that Congress had at last established Minnesota Territory—excited crowds gathered at the levee each day to look for the territorial governor among the passengers on upriver boats. When Ramsey did make his appearance at dawn on May 27, he literally caught the citizens napping, and not a soul was on hand to greet him when he stepped ashore.

Ramsey's presence soon became known, however, and the new governor made a favorable impression on those who met him. Writing in the Minnesota Pioneer on May 31, James M. Goodhue commented that Ramsey "rode down to our village on Monday and took the people of St. Paul by the hand. He is a plain, frank man, whom the people will like—they can't help it." The Minnesota Chronicle of the same day

rejoiced that "We are now organized. The wheels of government have commenced rolling on, may they cease only when time shall be no more."

In 1899, fifty years after his arrival, the eighty-four-year-old Ramsey received a visit at his home from a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, who was seeking the story of the territorial governor's trip from Pennsylvania to Minnesota in 1849. In the interview that followed, the elderly statesman recalled details of his journey westward and described his first impressions of the region that became his lifelong home. His reminiscent comments were reported in the Pioneer Press of November 9, 1899, under the title "Governor Half a Century Ago." The account, reprinted below, sheds light on the character of the area's first governor and, on the eve of the state's centennial in 1958, appropriately recalls the beginnings of organized government in Minnesota.

APRIL 2, 1849. "Appointed governor of Territory of Minnesota."

April 3, 1849. "Received commission as governor of Territory of Minnesota."

Alexander Ramsey, ex-congressman, ex-governor, ex-senator and ex-cabinet secretary, has kept a diary from his boyhood years back in the old Keystone state of Pennsylvania, and these are two entries of an occurrence that brought the now venerable statesman from his lawyer's office in Harrisburg to the frontier settlement of St. Paul, that changed the whole current of his life, and probably had no small effect upon the earlier development of the commonwealth of Minnesota.¹

At the age of twenty-eight Alexander Ramsey found himself in congress. That the distinction should have fallen upon one

¹ Copies of Ramsey's diaries for 1849-54, 1860-62, and his original diaries for 1863 and 1864 are among his papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

² Ramsey doubtless refers to Mrs. Ann G. Spriggs, a widow who kept a popular boardinghouse on a site now occupied by the Library of Congress.

of his years is the more remarkable in that he was chosen to represent an old settled district in Central Pennsylvania. Born in 1815, he was chosen in 1842, and began his service in the national house of representatives in 1843, the youngest member of the Twenty-eighth congress, an ardent Whig in politics.

"It was the custom then in Pennsylvania, as it may be now, to give a man two terms, and so they sent me back to the Twenty-ninth congress and then I dropped out," said he yesterday. "It was during that congress that I first met Lincoln. He was chosen to the Thirtieth congress and came to Washington during the closing weeks of the Twenty-ninth congress in January or February, 1847, 'to get the hang of the schoolhouse,' as we used to say. He came to the boarding house where a number of us stopped, kept by a Mrs. Sparks, or Start, or some such name.² No, I don't think that there was anything about him then to attract attention. I have often been asked that question, but I can't recall any signs of his future greatness then apparent."

BUT ALTHOUGH the young congressman [Ramsey] was out of congress he was by no means out of politics. He had gone back to his law practice at Harrisburg, but the next campaign [1848] found him in command of the Whig forces in Pennsylvania as chairman of the state central committee.

"The duties of that position took me all over the state from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia and from Erie to Easton. In most of the states the system then prevailed of having the state election in October and the federal election in November, and that was the case in Pennsylvania. Well, we elected our Whig candidate for governor [William F. Johnston] and we gave the vote of the state to Gen. Zachary Taylor, the Whig candidate for the presidency.

"After the election there sprung up in our party quite a strong sentiment in favor of my appointment to the position of collector of the port of Philadelphia. The



RAMSEY'S St. Paul home, sketched by R. O. Sweeny, 1852

sentiment was particularly strong among the young men of the party, although all my friends were very kind. As a matter of fact, it was an office to which I should have aspired. I suppose eighty-five looks at those things from a different point of view than thirty-five, but really it was a heavy financial office and belonged to a maturer man. Some of my friends appreciated that better than I did, and one of them was John M. Clayton of Delaware, United States senator and secretary of state in President Taylor's cabinet, with whom I had such an acquaintance as a young lieutenant may have with one of the leaders of his party. Senator Clayton was the first to suggest to me that I give up my aspirations for the collectorship and take the governorship of the new Territory of Minnesota, whose organization had just been provided for by congress.

"I confess that at first I disliked to make the change, and I remember that we had several conversations about the matter. He reminded me of Lewis Cass, who had been the Democratic candidate for the presidency, had taken the governorship of the Territory of Michigan, and that may have influenced me in some degree.³ At all events, I consented to take the governorship, and the president sent my name to the senate on April 2. My service in the

lower house had given me the acquaintance of most of the senators and my nomination was immediately confirmed unanimously, and my commission was issued the next day."⁴

The career of Lewis Cass might well have influenced a successful and ambitious young man, for Cass had not only been territorial governor of Michigan, but United States senator, secretary of war, minister to France and United States senator again, as well as the defeated candidate of his party for the presidency. And Gov. Ramsey's acceptance of the governorship of the

³ Cass was appointed governor of Michigan Territory in 1813 and was the Democratic candidate for president in 1848. See Allen Johnson, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 3:562-564 (New York, 1929).

⁴ The commission, dated April 2, 1849, is among the Ramsey Papers. Ramsey's memory of the circumstances is apparently in error, for he received a recess appointment which was not confirmed by the Senate until January 9, 1850. See United States Senate, *Journal of Executive Proceedings*, 8:98, 104, 117 (Washington, 1887).

⁵ For information on Justus C. Ramsey, see his obituary in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 25, 1881. Foster came to Minnesota as Ramsey's private secretary; for a biographical sketch, see Thomas M. Newsom, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul*, 151-153 (St. Paul, 1886).

⁶ According to Ramsey's diary, the party left Pennsylvania on May 6 and arrived on May 11 at Buffalo, where they stayed four days. For information on the railroads from Albany to Buffalo, see Frank W. Stevens, *The Beginnings of the New York Central Railroad*, 1-146 (New York, 1926).

frontier territory led to honors almost as distinguished.

"IT didn't take me so very long to get ready to depart for the West," continued Gov. Ramsey with a smile. "My business was not so extensive that I could not close it up in about a month. My brother [*Justus C. Ramsey*] wanted to come with me and so did Dr. Thomas Foster, whom all the older residents will remember.⁵ And there was my wife [*Anna*] and our child [*Alexander*] and a nurse [*Lavinia Seitzinger*], so that there was quite a little party of us when we started west, or rather east, for there was no railroad west of the Susquehanna at that time. In fact, the railroad had only a short time before pushed out as far as Harrisburg. We went to New York [City] by rail, and then by steamer up the Hudson to Albany. From Albany to Buffalo there was a railroad, or rather a succession of railroads. There was the Albany & Schenectady and the Schenectady & Utica, if I remember aright, and so

⁵ Ramsey spent May 19 at Milwaukee, and his diary for that day reveals that local dignitaries, including the directors of the projected Milwaukee & Mississippi Railroad, called on him to ask that he use his influence on behalf of the speedy construction of the road.

⁶ The stage trip from Milwaukee to Prairie du Chien took five days; see Ramsey's diary, May 21-25, 1849.

⁷ See a map in Mary Berthel, *Horns of Thunder: The Life and Times of James M. Goodhue*, 252 (St. Paul, 1948). Ramsey wrote in his diary on May 26 that the total expense of the trip "for wife, self, Lavinia, and child" had been \$262.25, or \$87.41 "per head."

on across the state, perhaps five or six in all, and my recollection is that there were no through cars, but that we had to change every time. I remember distinctly of getting out each time to look after the baggage.⁶

"At Buffalo we took the steamer 'Niagara,' a fine boat in those days, for Chicago, which wasn't much of a city then, although as a matter of fact I did not see it until a year or two later. Chicago was at that time in the midst of quite a severe epidemic of cholera and we left the steamer at Milwaukee.⁷ There was a stage line from Milwaukee off to the southwest terminating at Galena [Illinois], which was a thriving little city. It was a rough line through a rough country. It was a heavily timbered region and the trees had been cut pretty high. At Mineral Point [Wisconsin] we left the stage and I had to hire private conveyance to take us across [to] Prairie du Chien, where we were to take steamer up the [Mississippi] river.⁸ Fortunately one [the "Dr. Franklin No. 2"] came along within an hour or two after we reached Prairie du Chien.

"As was the custom then, all the boats running 'wild,' we went up the St. Croix to Stillwater, and leaving there at evening we reached St. Paul some time in the early morning, so that when I got up I suppose it was not later than 5 o'clock. It was the morning of May 27, 1849. The steamer had shoved her nose into the bank along between Jackson and Sibley streets.⁹

BASS'S hotel at
Third and Jackson
in St. Paul



"AS I RECOLLECT it there was not more than a dozen or fifteen houses in sight as I walked up from the boat to take my first view of the new capital of the new territory and my future home, although the population must have been out of all proportion to the number of houses. It was at that time about two or three hundred.¹⁰ There was hardly the suspicion of a street but the houses were scattered about without much regard to regularity, here and there another, as suited the fancy of the proprietor.

"There was a hotel where the Merchants now stands [called] the St. Paul house. It was then kept by Mr. [Jacob W.] Bass, who had, I believe, recently purchased it from one of the Folsoms.¹¹ I walked up there and looked the place over with a view to engaging accommodations for our party. It was not large, built of tamarack poles, with little rooms evidently designed to pack away as many people as possible in the smallest amount of space. It was not a particularly hopeful prospect and I did not engage quarters. As I stood at the door wondering what I would do next, I noticed a house not far away which bore signs of being under repair. It was a story and a half structure standing on what is now Third street, somewhere between Jackson and Robert." And it was noticeable that Gov. Ramsey pronounced it "Robair" in remembrance of the man [*Louis Robert*] from whom the street took its name.¹²

"There was a half-grown lad coming down that way, and I called out asking him who owned that house. He replied 'They are getting it ready for the governor.' Of course he didn't know who I was. In fact, I had had no correspondence with any one in St. Paul and no one was particularly expecting my arrival. But the fact that a house was being prepared was encouraging, and I returned to the boat.

"ALL the boats then ran up to Fort Snelling and St. Peter[s], as Mendota was then called, and the captain or the clerk sug-

gested that I go on up to St. Peter[s] with them and see Mr. [Henry H.] Sibley, afterward Gen. Sibley, who was the agent of the American Fur company, which then did about all the business that was done in this country. It was still early in the morning when we reached St. Peter[s]. Gen. Sibley was one of the first to greet me, and he proposed at once that I make my home with him until the house in St. Paul was ready. Womanlike, Mrs. Ramsey protested that it was not the thing to impose upon Mr. Sibley the burden of entertaining a party so large as ours, but I soon convinced her that there wasn't anything else to be done.¹³ And so we landed at St. Peter[s] and remained Mr. Sibley's guests for nearly or quite a month in that stone house which he had built and which still stands.¹⁴

"In the meantime we sent to St. Louis for furniture and household goods, and when they arrived we took up our abode in St. Paul, and here I have been ever since.¹⁵ We came down from Mendota to St. Paul in an Indian canoe.

¹⁰ The 1849 census of Minnesota Territory, taken in mid-summer, showed St. Paul to have a population of 910. The original returns are in the State Archives.

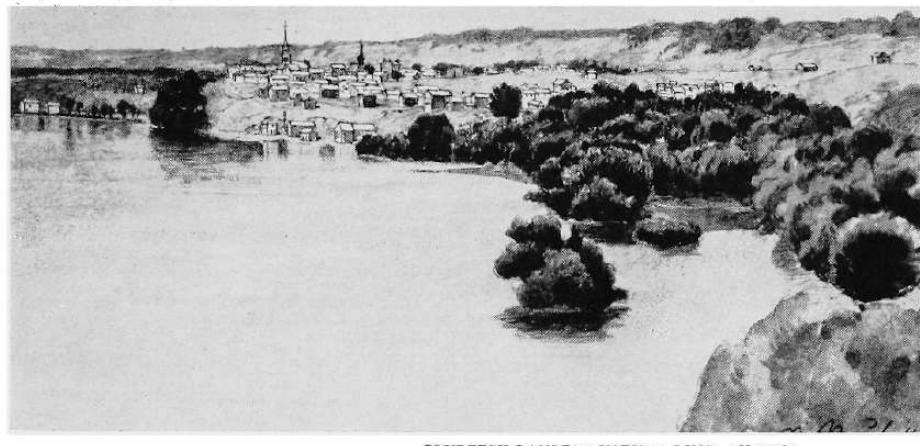
¹¹ The hotel was completed in 1847 by Simeon P. Folsom. From 1847 to 1852, Bass managed it, changing its name to the Merchants Hotel and making additions and improvements. The original building was razed in the late 1860s, and the Merchants Hotel mentioned by Ramsey was opened on the site in 1871. It, in turn, was razed in 1923. See Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity*, 1:415 (Chicago, 1912); *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 8, 1923.

¹² Robert was a fur trader who went to St. Paul in 1844. He remained in the city and became a prominent steamboat owner and real-estate speculator.

¹³ Knowing the housing situation in St. Paul, Sibley had written Ramsey on May 24 asking him to be a guest at his Mendota home "for any length of time that may suit your convenience." The letter was left at St. Paul to be given to the governor upon his arrival, but apparently he did not receive it until later. It is among the Ramsey Papers. This visit was the beginning of a warm lifelong friendship between Sibley and Ramsey, which continued despite their differing political affiliations.

¹⁴ The Ramseys stayed at the Sibley House, which still stands in Mendota, until June 25. Entries in Ramsey's diary reveal that their host took them to the Falls of St. Anthony and the St. Croix Valley.

ST. PAUL, 1851.
Water color
by J. B. Wengler



COURTESY LANDESMUSEUM, LINZ, AUSTRIA

"The other territorial officers were Judges [Aaron] Goodrich, [Bradley B.] Meeker and [David] Cooper, Secretary C[harles] K. Smith, Attorney H[enry] L. Moss and Marshal [Joshua L.] Taylor.¹⁶ Judge Goodrich, I remember, was here when I arrived, but I am not sure about the others. They were either here or came shortly after, except Mr. Moss, who maintained his residence at Stillwater for a year or two."

HISTORY RECORDS that almost the first act of the new governor upon arriving at his seat of power was a subscription of \$5 toward a town pump—a much needed public improvement.¹⁷ One of the anecdotes connected with Gov. Ramsey's arrival

¹⁵ Ramsey ordered the furnishings for the gubernatorial household, costing \$245.72, from Pierre Chouteau, Sibley's employer, at St. Louis. See Sibley to Chouteau, June 20, 1849, Sibley Letterbook, Sibley Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁶ Alexander Mitchell was the first marshal of Minnesota Territory. Taylor, for whom Taylor's Falls is named, was appointed to the post, but declined to serve. See W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest*, 336 (St. Paul, 1888).

¹⁷ In his diary for June 26, 1849, Ramsey wrote: "Subscription to public pump in St. Paul's [\$]5.00."

¹⁸ See the *Minnesota Pioneer*, May 31, 1849; William B. Hennessy, *Past and Present of St. Paul, Minnesota*, 65 (Chicago, 1906). In a letter to Major Woods dated May 30, Ramsey expresses his intention to inspect the fort on the following day. In a reply of the same date, Woods says that he "will be in readiness to receive you as the Gov. of Minnesota." Both letters are in the Ramsey Papers.

which has found its way into recorded local history, relates to his first visit to Fort Snelling a day or two after his arrival at Mendota. The commanding officer [Major Samuel Woods] was very anxious to do the honors for the new governor, and proposed that the governor's salute of seventeen guns be fired. Gov. Ramsey hoped that there would be no such demonstration in his honor. Then it was proposed that the guard be called out.¹⁸

"Don't do it," replied Gov. Ramsey, "I don't want any fuss made."

"I want to do something to show proper respect to the chief executive of the territory," persisted the commandant. "Is there anything you would suggest or desire?"

"Yes," returned the young governor, after the manners of the day; "if you have a little good whisky in the house I'll take a glass."

RAMSEY served as territorial governor until 1853 when he was replaced by Willis A. Gorman. He remained in Minnesota and became the second governor of the new state in 1860. Later he served for twelve years in the United States Senate, and he was secretary of war in the cabinet of President Rutherford B. Hayes. After a distinguished career, he retired from public life in 1886 and died in St. Paul in 1903.



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](#).